

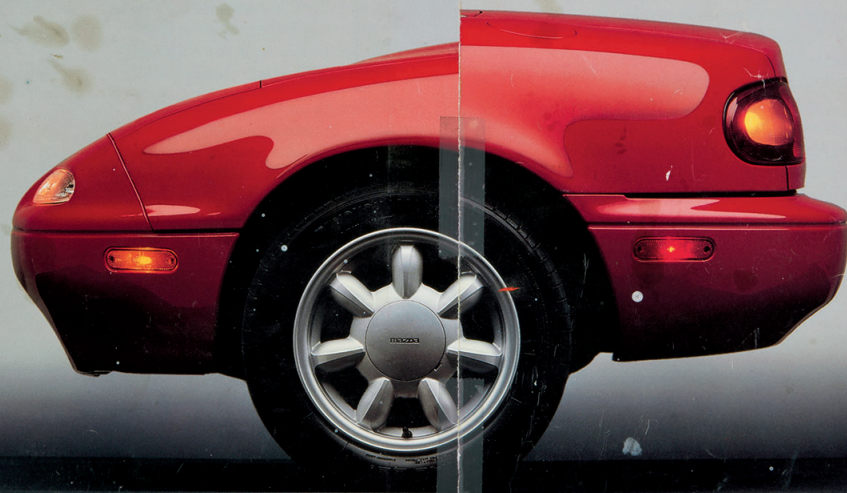


Peter Cain

Beau Rutland Collier Schorr Richard Meyer

Matthew Marks Gallery

Its sensucrength.



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Peter Cain's studio two weeks after his death

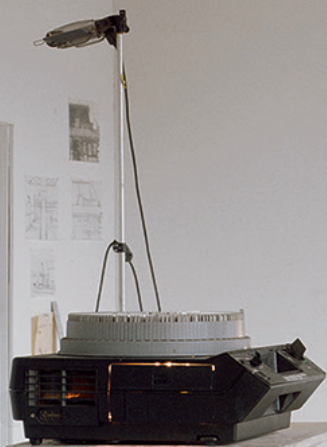






December 1996						
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	3	4	5	6	7 WFMU 11 RECORD 78 FAIR MARY HELP OF CHRISTMAS CHURCHAVE EISENBERG	
	10	11	12 NOON NOON TO THREE TROUBLE	13	14	
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23	24	25	26 SOMEWHERE OUT THERE 7:00-8:00 Boring Out	27	28	
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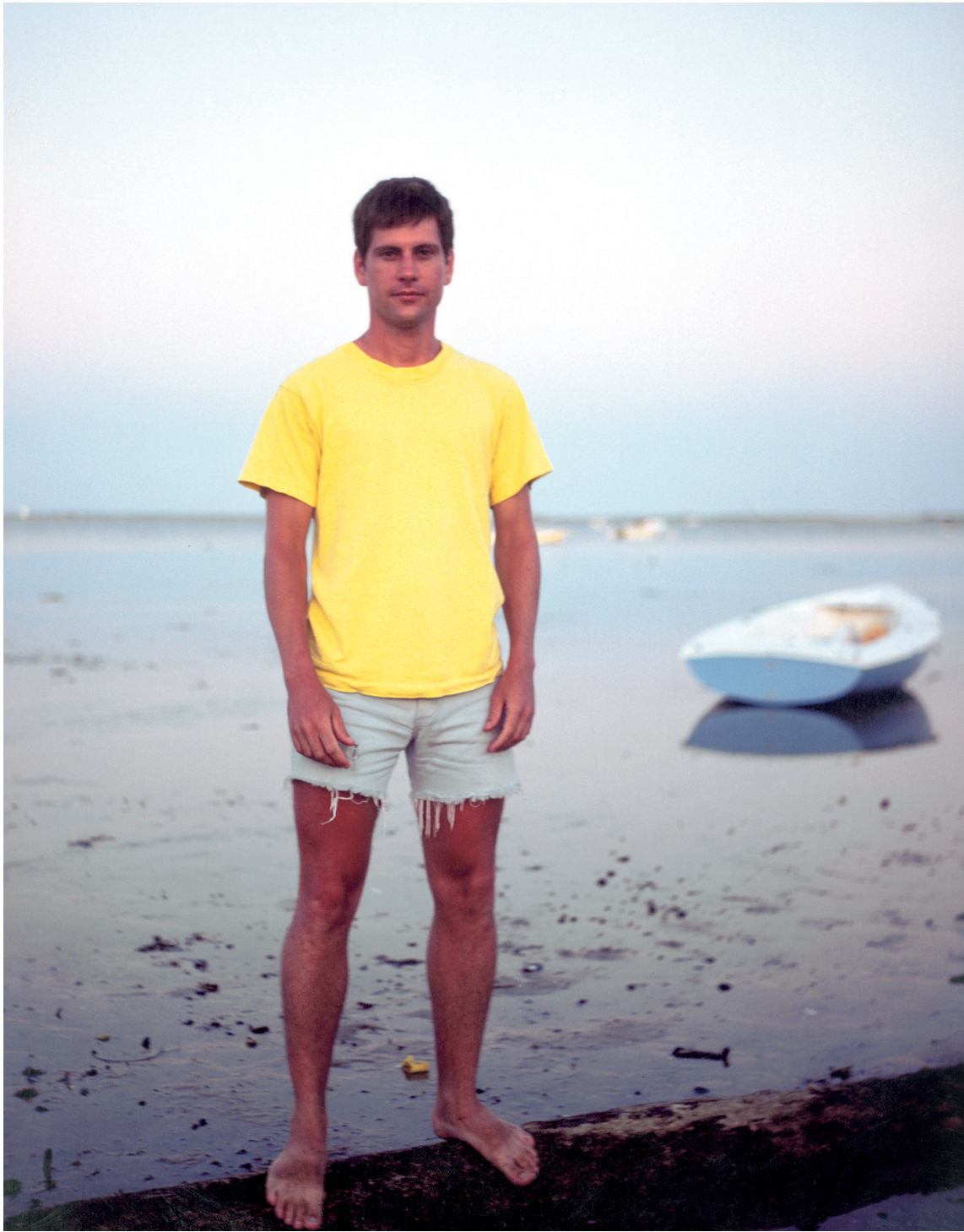


I HOPE YOUR
NOT POSPONING
BECAUSE OF
FEAR

MORE
COURAGE
AND
LESS
OIL







Jack Pierson
Peter Cain in Provincetown, MA, 1993

A Saturday Disaster: The Life and Art of Peter Cain

Beau Rutland

“It’s hard to describe a painting. You can describe to a certain extent, but it’s always more than that. Always. The more is the part that matters.” —Robert Ryman¹

“I didn’t ask to be a legend.” —Judy Garland

Peter Cain didn’t ask to be a legend. Like countless other talents before him, he died younger than we would have liked. But a tragic death does not a legend make. Cain has remained of interest to enterprising young art historians and artists for his expertly executed, inscrutable paintings. Yet part of his work’s appeal since his death in 1997 has been the requisite act of discovery: the unearthing of a history that, oddly, has yet to be fully written, and the tracking down of artworks that belong to curiously few institutional collections.

After all, staying remembered takes a lot of energy and effort, and not just on the part of the artist. Within contemporary art, as with any field that focuses on the next rather than the now, being forgotten in favor of what’s currently fashionable is almost a given. Even if an artist achieves something great — say, a rave review in *The New York Times* — he or she still has to show up to galleries and lectures and dinners in order to remain part of the conversation; an artist must first establish a legacy before it can become someone else’s job to maintain.

Peter Cain was part of the conversation from the late 1980s through the 1990s. He received rave reviews, was included in landmark exhibitions, and had a horde of artist friends. Less than a decade into his career as an artist, he died suddenly at age thirty-seven. For the generation of artists who were around New York during his lifetime (and a younger generation of art enthusiasts who have discovered his work through exhibition catalogues from the 1990s), he is seen as a “cultish” figure, an appellation given to him by *The New York Times* in 1995.²

Along the lines of Robert Ryman’s quote above, you only need to spend a few minutes in front of a car painting by Cain to see that there is more to it than its source material and everyday subject matter. He would rework, edit, and distort

various makes and models through an analog process of cutting and pasting, then render the new construction with oil paint in a manner that verged on realism. Between 1987 and 1995 his paintings evolved, subtly and sweetly, requiring one to look rather than just see. Then, in 1995 and 1996, he began two new bodies of work, both radically different from and perfectly harmonious with his previous output.

In an essay published shortly after Cain's unexpected death, Carroll Dunham, a friend and fellow painter, wrote, "With Peter's death, I've never felt so aware of art history's contingency on the actual."³ What Dunham says is true and unsettling. If you were to die today, would your life's work stand the test of time? Which ideas of yours would go unrealized? Dunham continues, "We don't count what people think about or what they might have done, only what they do." As Cain was a slow and fastidious painter, this automatically leaves his work and his legacy in a precarious situation.

Considering that he never fully made the transition from emerging artist to firmly established one, the literature on Cain is surprisingly abundant. Most articles, written around four moments in his life and afterlife — clustered around specific solo exhibitions in 1991, 1993, 1997, and 2005 — echo the same sentiments and ideas. This speaks more to the circumstances of the writings than to the authors themselves. Most of these reviews and essays were written as either a spotlight of a young artist on the rise or a touching tribute to an artist taken too soon.

Over the twenty years since his death, information about Cain and his work has become cloaked by time; some of his relatives and closest friends have died, a handful of paintings are in unknown locations, and the memories of those who survive him are tenuously tied to old feelings. Details have been lost, but his work remains. Given the scant material on his personal life, a certain human texture and sense of motivation — necessary aspects of any critical biography — are difficult to summon. For this essay, when possible, firsthand accounts were gathered via interviews conducted with members of the artist's circle. The following pages are an attempt to retrieve the underappreciated history of Peter Cain, to look at it anew, and to provide a comprehensive overview of his innovations, challenges, and legacy.

*

Peter Cain was born in Orange, New Jersey, in 1959. Part of a conservative family with traditional values, he grew up, alongside two sisters and a brother, in Livingston and then Morristown, both upper-middle-class towns a short train ride from Manhattan. In 1978 he graduated from Madison High School, where he was a close friend of Joan Wallace, who soon after became a 1980s art-world fixture as one half of the duo Wallace and Donohue. Cain experimented with art throughout his youth; according to his sister Margaret, he "always loved to paint and draw and had a special penchant for cars."⁴ He spent his adolescence roaming around New York City, exploring what the downtown scene had to offer, whether going to shows at CBGB, befriending the art critic Edit DeAk, or allegedly dating Mudd Club co-owner Diego Cortez.

Cain eventually left New Jersey for New York in the late 1970s. He attended Parsons at the New School, later transferring to the School of Visual Arts, where

he studied painting until he graduated in 1982. In 1984, despite his parents' protestations, he decamped to Brazil with a boyfriend. Returning the next year, Cain, like many young artists just starting out in the city to this day, began a string of studio-assistant jobs for high-profile 1980s figures including Donald Baechler, McDermott & McGough, and Ray Smith. Following a disagreement with Smith, Cain quit on the spot; it was the last time he worked for another artist. Not one to compromise his ideals, his independent streak and sense of pride would greatly factor into his career in the following years.

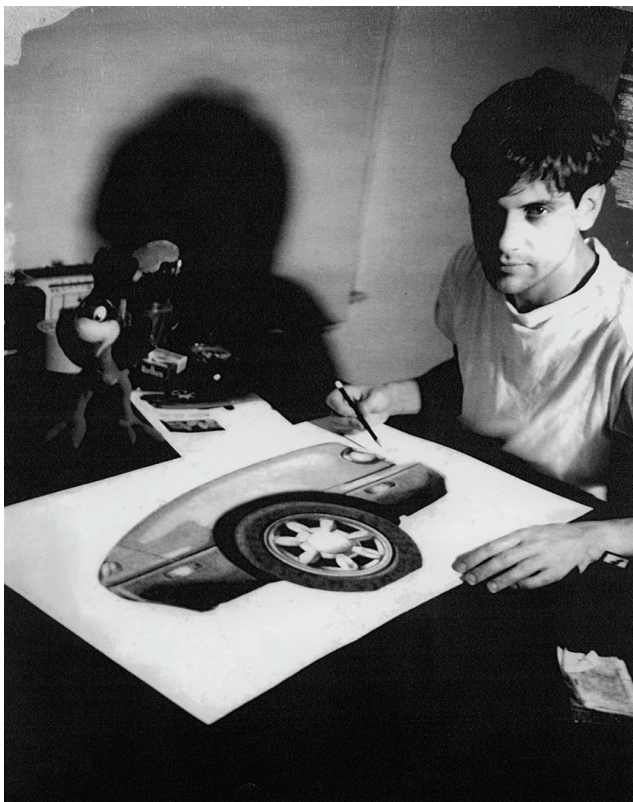
Cain was very dear to many people, whether as a friend, a fellow artist, a lover, or even just an acquaintance. He clearly was the type of person you would want to be around. He was also painfully shy, which seems surprising, considering the self-confidence so many of his friends have mentioned. But this self-confidence mainly revolved around his artwork — his paintings are imbued with it. According to Cain's longtime friend and fellow artist Frank Camarda, "Peter took his work very seriously," an observation shared by many others.⁵ Incredibly smart but also stubborn, he could not be pushed into doing something if he wasn't interested. A certain artist archetype comes to mind here, as embodied by Paul Thek: good looks accompanying social graces in the face of social anxiety, the "odd man in."⁶ During interviews, those who knew Cain were always eager to attempt to describe his unique *mélange* of qualities.

As an artist, Cain seemed to have an aura about him. A recollection by one of his art dealers, Simon Watson, helps give context to Cain's approach to artmaking. Watson was a key figure in downtown New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and he ran a traditional gallery before opening a project space on Lafayette Street.⁷ He met Cain in 1988 through Camarda, who was working at that time as a freelance art handler, and he recalls selling just three or four paintings, directly out of the studio, where Cain was often surrounded by car magazines and paper clippings. According to Watson, Cain's studio apartment (which doubled as his art studio) had the air of a "high school rec room/gym: not slovenly, but... running shoes all over and 'Sorry for the bed.'" Still, in the midst of all this personal jumble, Cain's work stood out as a quiet meditation. As Watson notes, "The drafting table was the one pristine space." During studio visits, sometimes by inquisitive collectors, Cain provided mostly monosyllabic responses.

In the words of Nan Goldin, "Peter was very special. He was our all-American boy, a dreamboat."⁸ Cain's dating life appeared to have been rather lively, if not prolific; his good looks and boyish charm became a thing of legend. In conducting interviews for this essay, it was not unusual to ask how someone first met Peter Cain and then hear the reply, "Oh yeah, Peter and I dated." Ricky Clifton, interior designer and bon vivant, claims to have been the first in the art world to "discover" Peter, while cruising on the Chelsea Piers. Curator Bill Arning remembers sitting behind Cain on a bus to a gay rights rally in Washington, DC. And let us not forget the period when Cain dated Misty, of Goldin's indelible 1991 photograph *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a Taxi, NYC*. All of which illustrates how incredibly full of life Cain was — a fact that remains difficult to imagine with so few traces of his personal life preserved in the public realm.

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Fig. 1
Peter Cain in his studio on the Bowery, 1991



Cain's oeuvre more or less begins in 1987, when he was twenty-eight years old. In a fit of frustration, he destroyed nearly all of his early work on a trip home to New Jersey. The earliest surviving work, fittingly, contains a car. You can't exactly call it a car painting, however. *Untitled* [p. 35] depicts a convertible cruising along a winding coastal road, its driver wearing sunglasses as he turns the wheel hard to the right. Across all of Cain's paintings, this is the only motorist to be shown. An array of dry brushstrokes constituting pavement and roadside brush give the sensation of speed without much fuss. Based upon a full-page magazine advertisement, it is the closest the artist ever came to appropriating a commercial image wholesale, without alteration. Effectively a duplication of an ad, it fits within Cain's work as an exercise in reproduction. As a test run of sorts, it serves an important role in revealing the paths he chose *not* to take, leaving behind narrative, the human form, and outright appropriation.

Throughout the next two years Cain focused intensely on his automotive subject matter, exploring various possibilities for representing the car through a wide range of formal solutions. One early series of grisaille paintings [pp. 40–43] depicts mammoth 1950s sedans and station wagons (already vintage in 1988) parked in situ against various landscapes. The source images were originally published in the pages of *Collectible Automobile*, specifically a spread focused on Ford sedans from 1956 and 1957, including the Fairlane, Country Sedan, and Ranchero [fig. 2]. Other works [pp. 81–87] were based on sales notices that could be found in the back of trade magazines, many of which read like personal ads. *Untitled* (1988) [p. 39] is the largest painting of the group, perhaps sized so that Cain could fit the entirety of the chic-though-hearse-like 1974 Cadillac Fleetwood Series limousine onto the canvas without sparing any detail. Per the ad it was taken from [fig. 3], "All the luxuries including front & rear stereo, heat & air, divider glass, jump seats, \$3500. Fly in and drive home. 919-537-4843." Curiously, one of the cars he sourced [fig. 4] appears to be split in half, a hybrid of the changes between one year's design and the next, a combination of the outmoded and newly engineered.

Such early works reveal an interest not just in manipulating images, but in the ways that an image is capable of manipulating or influencing how one perceives its subject matter. One painting, *Untitled* (1989) [p. 47], shows Cain evoking high noon on the highway, when the asphalt, under a blistering sun, appears wet and reflective, mirage-like. And yet the painting is based on a photo of the back end of a white Oldsmobile at dusk, the fading sunlight reflecting off its body in puddles of light; the taillights are lit and glow ominously.

As many writers have opined, automobiles easily conjure the entire spectrum of modern life: money, sex, power, freedom, death, destruction, and salvation. Cain experimented with the car as a symbol, a ready-made image, by only slightly altering his source material of choice (primarily print ads from auto-industry trade magazines): removing a door's lip here, elongating a chassis there, and repositioning the car within the composition of a canvas. Surely he was aware of his imagery's possible connotations, but — and this seems particularly important to note — his friends are quick to point out that he didn't know much about cars or what made them run, and he didn't much care to know. Oddly, his early critics assumed that he lived for cars, as if he harbored a teenager's after-school passion. For instance, Grace Glueck wrote that "some artists are fascinated by pulchritudinous women; Mr. Cain has his cars."

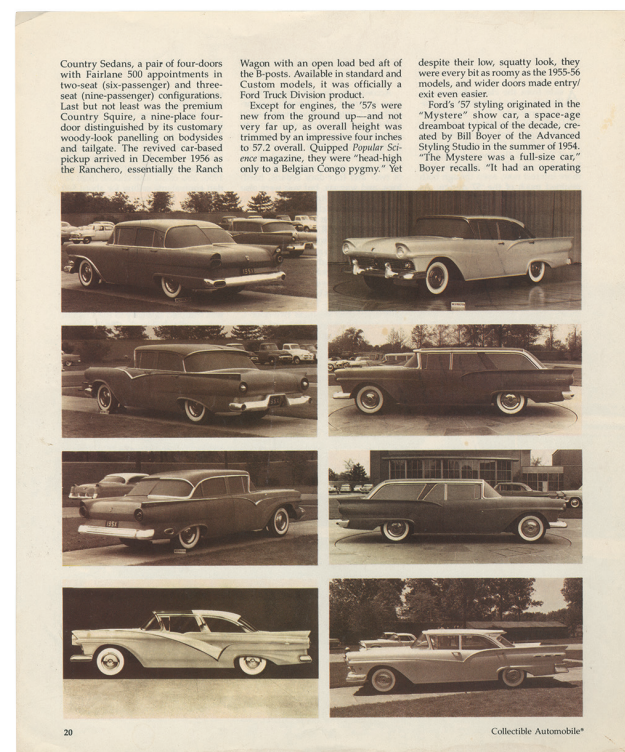


Fig. 2
Collectible Automobile magazine, c.1988, found in the artist's studio

Fig. 3
Enlargement of a classified ad, c.1988, found in the artist's studio

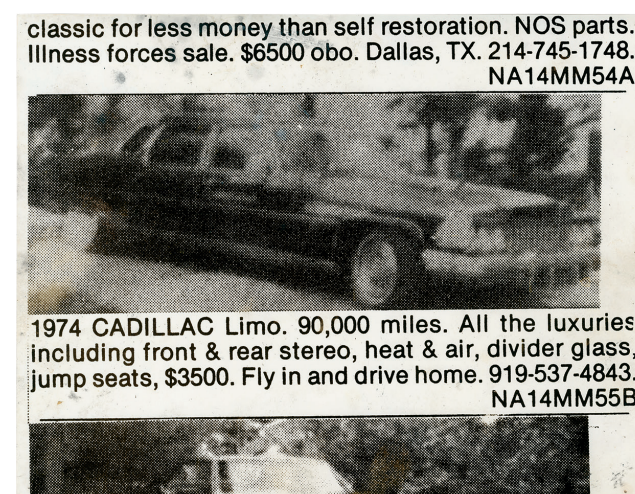
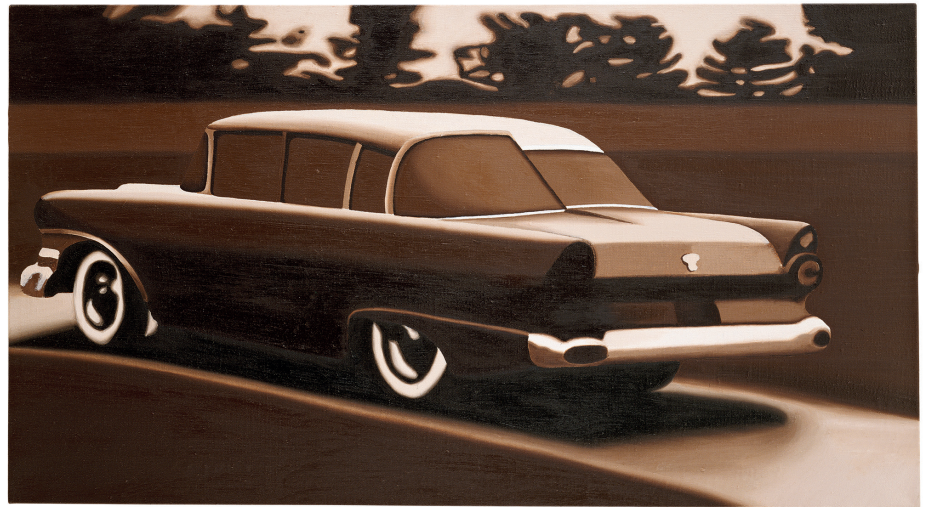


Fig. 4
Untitled, 1988–89
 Oil on linen
 20 x 36 inches; 51 x 91 cm



Glueck isn't alone in linking the car paintings with carnal desires. Several rather dated-feeling (and, well, very 1990s) entries in the Cain literature go straight for the phallus, positing his rearrangement of car parts as a dismantling of societal constructs of masculinity.¹⁰ In this light, one might think of Mel Ramos's crass pictorial commercialism. Ramos's buxom beauties have an irritating quality, shared by wax-works, that makes you long for a hint of reality, some slight blemish to create a sense of humanity. In comparison to Cain's incongruously stirring paintings of vehicles, these idealized nudes posing atop consumer products seem rather defanged.

*

And then came the single-wheel painting. Beginning in 1989, Cain started to render cars that appeared to be radically transformed from the quotidian vehicles seen on city streets and suburban highways. During this time, his subjects went from discreetly finessed (a chassis slightly extended) to radically altered. Looked at chronologically, this is the moment when all of his interests, and the ways in which he applied them to canvas, clicked. The images that followed became icons of his oeuvre. What seems to separate them from those that came before is a burst in confidence and ambition. Within that one year his paintings nearly doubled in scale, and the precision of his brushwork drastically increased, as seen in *Untitled* (1989) [fig. 5], one of his first single-wheel paintings.

Each of the canvases features a car of some kind — a Mazda Miata, a Honda Prelude, a Porsche Carrera — shown in profile, balancing atop one wheel, with its passenger cabin completely removed so that the fender flows seamlessly into the bumper. The background of *Untitled* is composed of a series of stripes, the side of the road caught at high speed. Throughout the single-wheel works, Cain made good use of the cars' reflective surfaces — hoods, rims, fenders, windows, taillights — as moments that would allow for greater painterly liberation, opportunities to introduce new colors and more expressive brushwork. Before starting each

painting, he would concentrate on the form by making several finished sketches and one meticulous “slow” drawing per painting.

In keeping with the logic of his earlier paintings, each of Cain’s newly reconstructed cars began as a print ad [fig. 6]. Selecting only cars featured in strict profile, he would cut the magazine ad in two and then overlay the halves, sliding each part toward the other until the front wheel and back wheel merged into one [p. 4]. Taping these two halves into a collage, he would have color copies made that he would trace and retrace, removing distracting details like the rising slope of a windshield. He would then redraw this simple reduction, producing the form that would appear in the final work. There’s an intuitive, homespun approach to how he made these car-structures, though many reviews told a different story, of these “mutants” being the product of some complicated process of rearrangement or transmogrification.

By removing the passenger cab as well as the driver’s seat, Cain has negated not only the purpose of the car’s existence but also its place in society and popular culture, the widespread growth of which the automobile had helped enable following World War II.¹¹ Removing the human aspect of the car, the fact that it exists to serve us, is inherently unsettling — what would cars transport if not people, and why? In this way, Cain created a fleet of self-sufficient automatons not unlike the replicants made famous in the 1982 film *Blade Runner*. Cain’s machines give new meaning to the term “auto body.” His early sketches of fused cars bear a notable likeness to Robert Gober’s drawings of enmeshed body parts, underscoring the importance of the human rather than the mechanical in Cain’s work.

As he examined hundreds of car ads from the 1950s to the 1990s, a new facet of Cain’s work started to emerge. By selecting only cars shown passively in profile, rather than examples seen actively twisting and turning through some bucolic or urban landscape, he limited the humanity of his subject along with the viewer’s potential empathy toward it. These images adhere to the strict frontality of mug shots, allowing Cain to focus our attention on the shape and iconography of the car so that in his work it becomes a sign without a signifier.

Critics have contended that Cain rotated some of his canvases — à la Georg Baselitz — after the fact, as a way to further abstract what had already been taken apart and reconfigured, to provide additional pictorial interest. Yet this gesture seems too arbitrary within such a focused body of work. A photograph taken inside Cain’s Bridgehampton studio (where he retreated when he became sober after years of substance abuse) reveals a work in progress already facing the wrong side up [fig. 7].

This early period, from 1989 to 1993, is Cain’s most prolific; he had a solo exhibition each year, and his work was included in many group shows. His exhibition history had an auspicious start in 1989 with an unofficial solo show at the Pat Hearn Gallery. The legendary Hearn, alongside her partner, Colin de Land, was one of the most respected and influential art dealers of the 1980s and 1990s. Hearn exhibited many seminal artists early in their careers, including Mary Heilmann, Rosemarie Trockel, Susan Hiller, Mark Morrisroe, Jimmy DeSana, Philip Taaffe, Jutta Koether, Sophie Calle, Renée Green, Joan Jonas, Lutz Bacher, Laura Owens, and Steven Parrino. Cain received his turn when artist Jack Pierson, who worked at Hearn’s gallery at the time, recommended she visit Cain’s studio. Cain’s subsequent exhibition, however, was located in her upstairs space, apart from the main gallery, and he



Fig. 5
Untitled, 1989
Oil on linen
58 x 70 inches; 147 x 178 cm

Fig. 6
Magazine advertisement, 1989, found in the artist’s studio

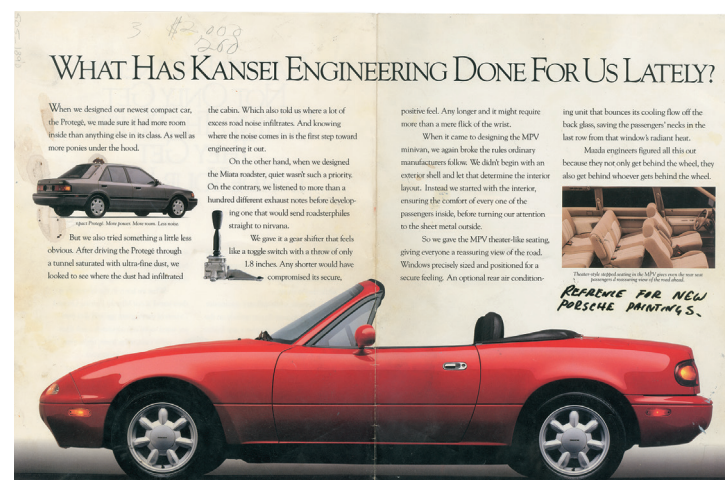




Fig. 7
Peter Cain in his studio with *EB 110*, Bridgehampton, 1992

was understandably frustrated by his situation — a limbo of sorts in which Hearn supported him to a degree but couldn't manage to sell his work.¹²

Although no eager buyers were lured upstairs, Cain's paintings began to generate a lot of glowingly positive press. He received his first magazine mention in 1990, from Jerry Saltz, one of his most vocal supporters to this day, who gleefully described him as “tantalizingly difficult to classify, [...] a strange, unorthodox, and odd young artist.”¹³ And yet many other critics had no difficulty in quickly classifying Cain as either a Photorealist or a Pop painter in the vein of James Rosenquist. Adding ammunition to this claim, his Pat Hearn show was accompanied by a pointedly unfashionable (yet unexpectedly interesting, as was Hearn's way) group show in the main gallery that included Photorealists Robert Bechtle, Chuck Close, Robert Cottingham, Malcolm Morley, and, curiously, Sigmar Polke.

Rosenquist makes for a sensible if obvious comparison: both artists took on commercial objects as subjects and depicted them from unlikely viewpoints, uncomfortably zoomed in. A work like *Broome Street Trucks After Herman Melville* (1963) [fig. 8] is Photorealism *avant la lettre*, yet something is quite off. The lower half of the painting utilizes only shades of yellow — like a tricolor print missing the cyan and magenta — while the upper portion contains an additional canvas layered on top, breaking up any remaining illusionism by emphasizing the painting's objecthood. Rosenquist's methodology and subject matter, even within a concentrated grouping of years, is fitful to say the least. If there is a connection between the two artists, it relies upon their interest in commercial imagery (billboards for Rosenquist and, for Cain, their equivalent in modern printing) and the methods through which it lures the consumer.

Regarded as a banal category for several decades now, Photorealism seems to diminish the intrigue of any artwork stuck under its auspices, implying a one-note

attempt to achieve the look of mechanical reproduction with the human hand. A more generative formal comparison might be found in the work of Konrad Klapheck [fig. 9], yet Klapheck's idealization of mechanized objects speaks more to the rise of automation throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Cain's work also calls to mind artists who use the human body and its accessories as a means of abstraction, such as the Italian artist Domenico Gnoli and the unfortunately overlooked 1980s painter Alan Turner.

Two notebooks found in Cain's studio after his death are particularly enlightening, in terms of not only his intentions but also just how committed he was to pushing his work forward. One, a pink notebook, reveals nuanced shifts in scale and composition from painting to painting; without the use of digital technology, working through such formal manipulations in one of his large-scale works must have required months of patience and perseverance. The notebook contains diagrams of every painting, drawing, and photograph Cain created since 1992, illustrating the composition and scale as well as the measurements and color of each portion of the image [fig. 11]. When possible, Cain noted the date each work was made.

The smaller, spiral-bound Clairefontaine notebook, the more humanizing of the two, is dedicated to potential titles for future works, and it is brimming with ideas — some used, others dismissed as “corny” or with a simple “no” [fig. 10]. This notebook is one of the most intimate artifacts to be found in Cain's archive. While many of his paintings are simply titled with a car's model name and number, later in his career he employed seemingly opaque titles tied to personal meanings. Some of the delightfully campy ideas show a softer or even giddy side of Cain, either playing with alliteration (LOS ANGELES LOVES LOVE) or indulging in the gay lore of classic Hollywood films and their stars: RAVEN (FOR ALLEN LADD), named for the male lead of the 1943 film noir *This Gun for Hire*, who played opposite Veronica Lake; FRANCES GUMM, the birth name of Judy Garland; and MILDRED PIERCE. GALAXIE 5000 is dedicated to beloved band Galaxie 500 (or perhaps the 1960s Ford sedan of the same name), while Cain's amusement with contemporary culture can be seen in the unused title TEENAGERS FOR CHASTITY.

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Cain was quoted in print only once during his lifetime. His words appeared in a Klaus Kertess essay that was included in the press release for his 1991 exhibition at Simon Watson. Aside from this one instance, there are very few primary sources for his thoughts and feelings, his voice, most of which reside in the Cain archive as short notes, memorandums, or guest lists with certain names crossed out. In a discussion with Kertess, cofounder of Bykert gallery and one of the most influential curators from the 1960s through the 1980s, Cain referred to Robert Ryman as the artist he was most influenced by:

In an effort to bring some verbal order to the mesmerized discomfort I felt in front of Peter Cain's work, I asked him what he thought his paintings were related to. “They could be like Robert Ryman,” he offered; and then, after a consequent pause, he added, “but they're obviously of something.”¹⁴

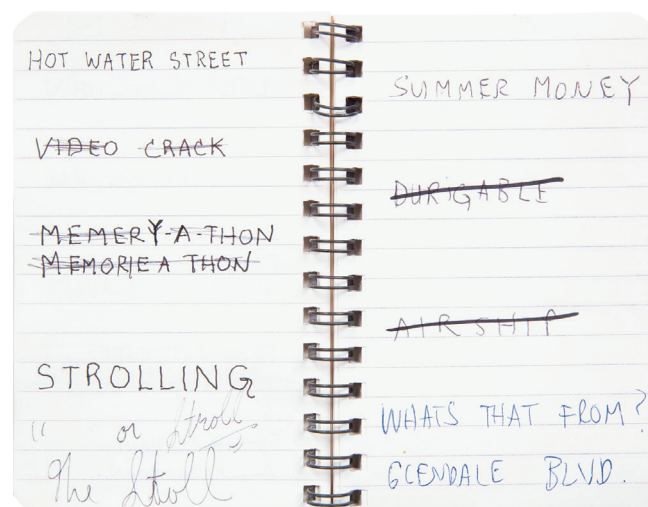
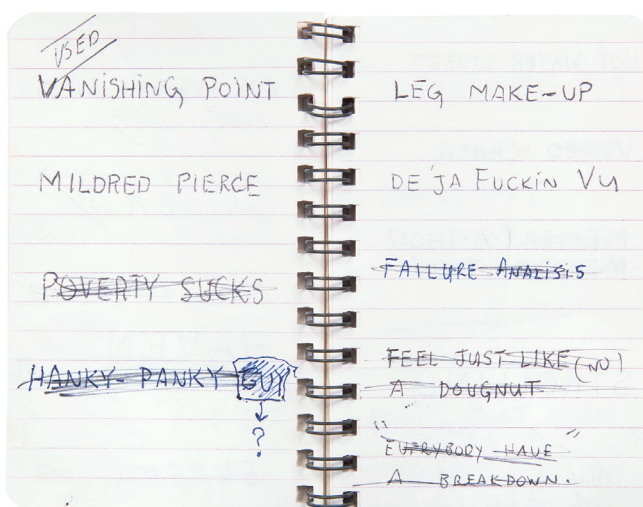
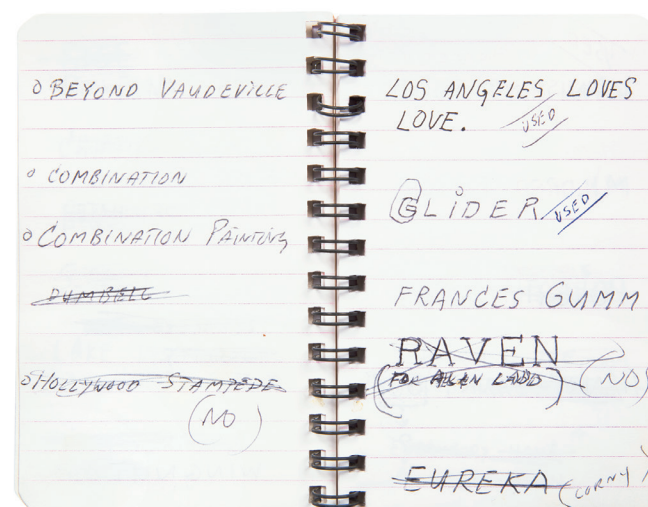
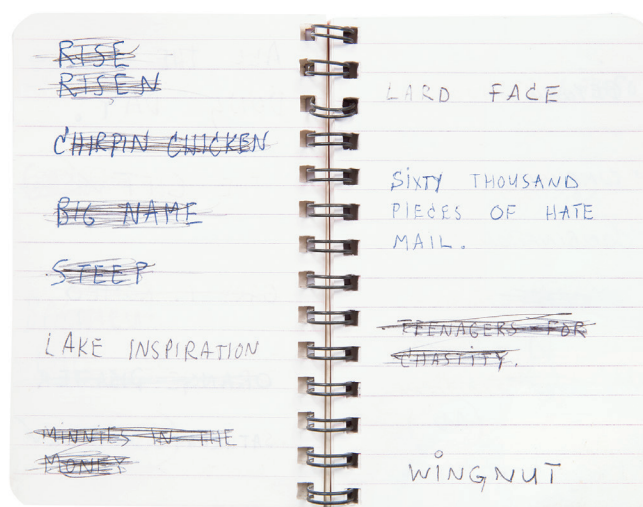
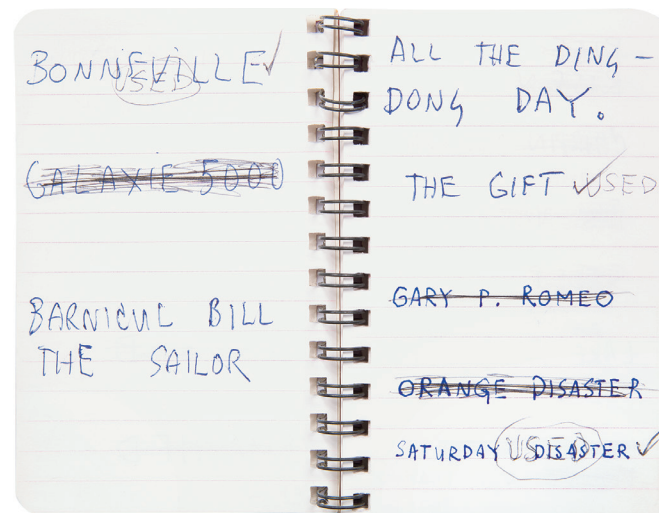
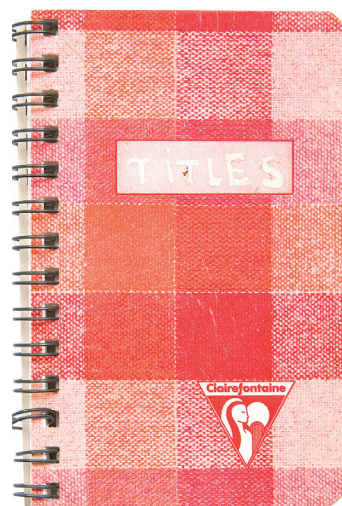


Fig. 8
James Rosenquist
Broome Street Trucks After Herman Melville, 1963
Oil on linen
72 1/8 x 72 1/8 inches; 183 x 183 cm
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Fig. 9
Konrad Klapheck
Female Logic, 1965
Oil on canvas
43 1/4 x 35 1/2 inches; 110 x 190 cm
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art



Fig. 10
 Titles, c. 1993–96
 Ink and graphite on paper in
 spiral-bound notebook,
 11 pages
 4¼ x 3¼ inches; 12 x 8 cm



Cain's response stopped Kertess in his tracks. Though he did confirm that Ryman and Cain are both traditional easel painters who share an obsession with "the means and medium of the acts of painting," Kertess had already formulated an idea that Cain's paintings were more related to the work of Duchamp, Kafka, Richter, and de Sade. In looking back at the cultural terrain of the time, it makes sense that Cain would have Ryman on the brain: in 1988 the Dia Center for the Arts in Chelsea mounted a large-scale exhibition of Ryman's paintings that would remain on view for nine months.¹⁵

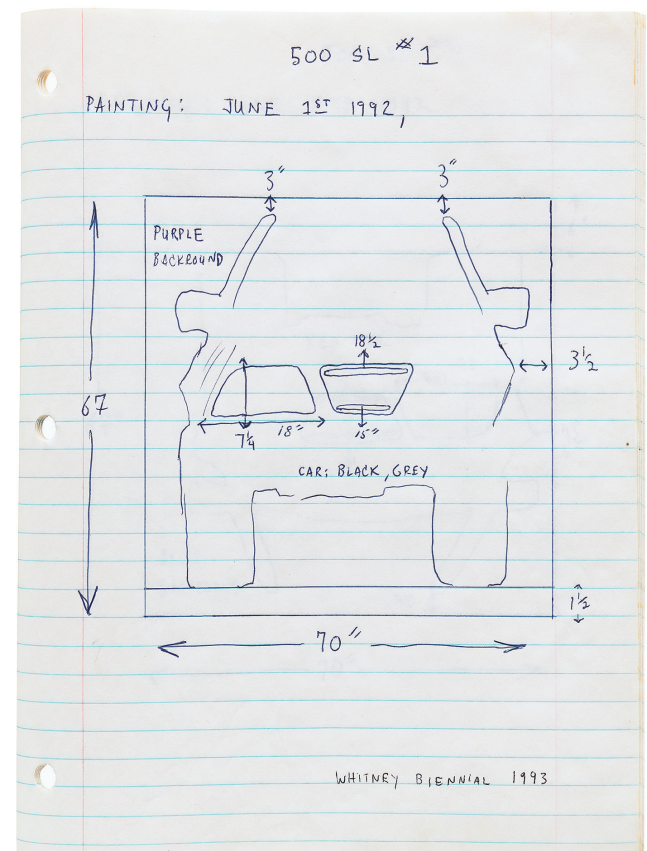
Cain's fascination with the process of painting, and his sensitivity to the form, was lost on several critics who fixated on the work's surface and facture. (Despite the praise many writers bestowed upon his convincing application of the airbrush, he never actually used one.¹⁶) Other writers were willing to dig deeper. On the occasion of his 1991 Simon Watson show, *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith wrote that Cain's paintings "elicit a visceral response, seeming creepily deformed or hybridized, shockingly sightless and limbless, like the automotive equivalent of blind mole rats."¹⁷ Another reviewer rather smartly mentioned J. G. Ballard, specifically his novel *Crash*.¹⁸

Cain's 1991 exhibition received wide coverage and secured a place for the young artist within the New York art scene. He was increasingly featured in prominent exhibitions and mainstream media, including a spread in *Elle Decor* and even an item in a *New York Post* gossip column.¹⁹ Achieving another hallmark of artistic success in 1990s New York, his work became a go-to selection for the curator of the moment, Christian Leigh, "the most flamboyant of the independent curators who had risen to prominence with the bull market of the 1980s."²⁰ Cain was included in "Slittamenti," the big-budget mishmash of a group exhibition in Venice that — though no one realized it at the time — would be the swan song of the larger-than-life Leigh. While his name may not ring a bell to young art followers today, for a certain generation any mention of Leigh is an invitation to spin a good old-fashioned yarn. Cain, in fact, was included in several of Leigh's exhibitions (most named after Hitchcock films, for no apparent reason aside from the theater of it all).

Within two years Cain had moved beyond depicting cars in the profile format for which his paintings had become known. The change irked some of the writers who reviewed his first exhibition at Matthew Marks, in 1993. The new paintings were based upon the 1992 Mercedes-Benz SL [pp. 63–67], a car that had quickly become a favorite for image-conscious professionals. Cain's notebook of finished works shows that each of the paintings varied by incredibly precise increments [fig. 11]. Such subtle shifts reveal two important things: first, his analog-age resolve to make a work by hand in order to see how it would read in person and, second, his interest, since the beginning of his practice, in abstraction over representation. These works, when viewed together as a suite of five paintings, illustrate his ability to tweak a recognizable image just to the edge of disintegration.

In 1993, a seemingly difficult year in the studio, Cain made very few paintings. Those he did make, a series of six small-scale grisaille paintings of vintage cars, appear to be relatively straightforward portraits [pp. 81–87]. They were finished in 1994. At least two are based on black and white photocopies of classified ads blown up to the point of losing their detail, the halftone printing and visible Benday dots rendering the car soft and hazy. The euphemism "transitional work"

Fig. 11
Page from Peter Cain's notebook of finished works



could be applied here, yet this 1994 series, created for an exhibition at Daniel Weinberg Gallery in San Francisco, seems to be more of a placeholder, based upon older images Cain had pulled from his files to keep himself occupied.

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New York City in the late 1980s and early 1990s was a battleground. The AIDS epidemic decimated countless communities and families. It was clearly a time for action: by 1990, deaths caused by AIDS-related illness had surpassed thirty thousand; Jesse Helms and his Republican brethren had become real threats to artistic freedom and the National Endowment for the Arts; women's reproductive rights were also at stake. In a particularly electric 1990 episode of the Phil Donahue show, an incredulous audience listened as AIDS activist Ann Northrop sternly tried to get them to realize that at the heart of the AIDS epidemic was a "virus that is spreading out of control because George Bush and the American people are afraid of talking about sex."

Watson, Cain's former gallerist, was an active member of AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP); his goal for his Lafayette Street enterprise was to devote the space to multidisciplinary social practices that would be funded through sales of works by artists who were responding to the political climate. He had previously run Baskerville+Watson, which fit the classic gallery model and mounted exhibitions with artists such as Sherrie Levine and Carroll Dunham. Some of the artists he showed at his new space made work that responded to the era directly, while others, like Cain, used more conceptual means.

Detractors and lazy interpreters alike were quick to pigeonhole Cain's work as a comment on (and product of) commodity culture — a rather facile argument dependent on the work's medium and source material (painting, cars). Yet when one imagines seeing this work for the first time in lower Manhattan in 1989, knowing that Cain was the all-American (gay) boy that everyone wanted to be with, his paintings quickly start to sear. Like much of the art being made within the LGBTQ community at that time, his work spoke from a place of profound sexuality, sensuality, and fear, yet through his automotive stand-ins he held all of that at a remove. These perfect, erotically charged machines are closed off to the world outside. Weirdly sterile and completely impenetrable, they are, as Watson succinctly put it, "eroticism caught in amber."

Young artists emerging at this time were part of a generation of individuals who were deeply wounded, bereft at the staggering presence of death and loss in their daily lives; society was largely against them, especially government officials, who stigmatized vast swaths of young Americans for loving who they wanted to love. Artworks that reached the heart of this moment lay bare an overwhelming feeling of displacement. Cain, at the peak of his youth and vitality, did everything he could to navigate that world. We can see him accessing what it felt like to be alive and scared during that catastrophic moment in time.

If there is a landmark art event of that era, it is the 1993 Whitney Biennial. In a sense, the Biennial — a show that elicited countless reviews (both emotive and dismissive) and hundreds of college papers for decades to come — picked up where the culture wars surrounding the cancellation of Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition at

the Corcoran Gallery of Art had left off. Now synonymous with identity politics, the exhibition included polarizing political work as well as cultural fragments many considered not to be art at all, most notably a videotape shot by a bystander, George Holliday, of four LAPD officers beating an unarmed black man, Rodney King, nearly to death. To put it plainly, many critics reviled the exhibition. As Michael Kimmelman famously wrote in *The New York Times*, “I hate the show.”

Of the two Cain paintings curator Elisabeth Sussman selected for the Biennial, *EB 110* (1993) [p. 73] is arguably Cain’s masterwork. It was based upon a print ad for the Bugatti EB110, a model named after the luxury car company’s founder, Ettore Bugatti, who was born exactly 110 years before its debut in 1991 [fig. 12].²¹ Cain’s auto, with its sharp, vivid-blue angles, recalls the race cars of F-Zero, the groundbreaking early-1990s video game. Set in the year 2560, the game’s premise is that intergalactic trade billionaires, desperate for entertainment, have fused Formula One cars with hovercrafts. Suspended upside down, presumably defying gravity with its sheer velocity, Cain’s car inspires a sense of dystopian futurism.

One of the most memorable views of the exhibition depicts the painting looming behind Charles Ray’s indelible work *Family Romance* (1993) [fig. 22]. Paired together were two mutants, a castrated sports car and an atomic family, the latter rendered nude in fiberglass and paint, with each standing figure scaled to the same stature, such that the patriarch’s height is the same as his toddler daughter’s. The brilliance of the juxtaposition was lost on many Biennial attendees. One critic stupidly joked that Ray’s family probably drove to the Whitney in Cain’s car.

A photograph taken from the opposite angle shows a Cain painting of a different persuasion, the pristine *500 SL #1* (1992) [p. 63] looming directly in the line of sight of Ray’s nuclear family, their pale, gleaming asses blocking the view [fig. 13]. The pairing became a conflation of flesh and metal, man-made mutations and innate human desires. Both works illustrate the very current idea of queering heterosexual norms. Moreover, both artworks negate the very things that make their subjects identifiable: What is a Mercedes without its logo? If each family member is the same size, who holds the power?

Since the 1993 Whitney exhibition, Cain’s work has largely been left out of even the most revisionist histories of the 1990s. As highly polished, skillfully executed representational paintings, his work did not fit the mold of the time, with its Photoconceptualism, text-based work, and abject sculpture. Likewise, his paintings did not wear any of their theoretical underpinnings on their sleeve. Several artists and curators interviewed for this essay brought up — unprompted — the negative feelings Cain’s peers had toward his work in the 1990s, most likely inspired by his daunting skill and the allure of his paintings, qualities that were then out of fashion. In a way, Cain’s works were just slightly too early for their time, preceding by just a few years the embrace of figurative painting that valued subjective vision over representation, as brought to the fore by artists such as Elizabeth Peyton, Karen Kilimnik, and John Currin.

Recently the tide has started to turn for Cain. Both popular culture and the art world have come to fixate on the 1990s for two obvious reasons: one, the landscape of the 1980s has already been excavated, leaving curators to look elsewhere for potential rediscoveries; and, two, millennials are quick to revisit the culture they were slightly too young to experience. One could argue that this reconsideration

Fig. 12
Magazine pages, c.1991, found in the artist’s studio





Fig. 13
View of the 1993 Whitney Biennial.
From front: Charles Ray, *Family Romance*,
1993. Peter Cain, *500 SL #1*, 1992 [p. 63]

was partly kindled by the 2013 exhibition “1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star” at the New Museum in New York. There, Cain’s *Pathfinder* (1993) [p. 69] was paired with works by Nayland Blake and Sarah Lucas. One year later the painting was acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago. Regarding the acquisition, the museum’s director, James Rondeau, emphasized the “absolute necessity of getting behind the inclusion of Peter Cain” in art-historical narratives of the 1990s.²²

*

In 1995 a man began to appear in Cain’s work. He was Sean LeClair, Cain’s boyfriend, who he had recently met on a trip to Florida. Various drawings of LeClair appeared in exhibitions and catalogues, though there was no clear indication what these works had to do with Cain’s cars, nor what had caused the shift in subject matter.

Cain’s 1995 exhibition at Matthew Marks, his last in his lifetime, was a surprisingly revelatory and even intimate affair. No, the paintings didn’t divulge details about Cain’s personal life, and the press release was nothing out of the ordinary. In his *New York Times* review, Pepe Karmel insisted that the line drawings of Sean were “more seductive than anything else in the show.” The checklist alone reveals that Cain was busy, maybe even overwhelmed — he had also been selected by his unstinting supporter Kertess for that year’s Whitney Biennial, an odd choice considering his prime placement the previous installment. So there were paintings he had to make for the Whitney as well as his gallery show timed

to the Biennial. In retrospect, the Matthew Marks exhibition had a peculiar air to it; the work was strong yet stiff, and there was little of it.

One of the newest paintings to be included in the show, *Glider* (1995) [p. 101], features an orange car reduced to one large taillight spanning the entire machine, the wheel wells protruding from both sides over a horizontally split background. The most noteworthy aspect of the work is the brushwork making up the long singular taillight. The paint handling is somewhere between quick and jubilant, a first for Cain and a welcome contrast to the tight handling in the rest of the painting. Up close, the light reflected off the red plastic reads like six quickly improvised approximations of an acidic Mark Rothko. Something was changing for him.

Cain spent 1995 and 1996 preparing for his fourth one-person exhibition in New York, his third at Matthew Marks, which was set to open in early 1997. One can imagine the pressure he was under, seeing the necessity of proving himself after all the attention that had been paid to his focus on cars. He finished his new work for the exhibition by December. At the end of that month, he had a cerebral hemorrhage, which was undiagnosed at the time. Feeling ill at home, he was brought to Saint Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center in Greenwich Village, where he entered into a coma. Three days later, on January 5, 1997, he died.

Cain's death was particularly difficult to grasp, or even to believe, not just because he was so full of vitality, youth, and promise; even after his death his presence lingered. His exhibition at Matthew Marks was slated to open less than a month after his passing, forcing Marks to make a decision about whether to proceed and how best to remember Cain. The exhibition opened as planned. Despite an added section memorializing the artist's absence, it felt as if there was some chance he was stuck in traffic on the way to his opening and would eventually show up. A picture of Cain, very much alive, standing among eighteen of his



Fig. 14
David Armstrong, Peter Cain, and Sean LeClair, 1995

Fig. 15
 Peter Cain (center) on the roof of 513–23 W 24th St, 1996,
 with (from left) Nayland Blake, Brice Marden, Robert
 Longo, Gary Simmons, Vinoodh Matadin, Inez van
 Lamsweerde, John Miller, Matt Mullican, Nan Goldin,
 Louise Lawler, Cain, David Armstrong, Vito Acconci,
 Cindy Sherman, Ronald Jones, Gary Hill, Laurie
 Simmons, Matthew Barney, Tony Oursler



artist-peers, appeared in *The New Yorker* the same week he died [fig. 15]. Marking the opening of 513–23 West 24th Street, a building housing Barbara Gladstone, Matthew Marks, and Metro Pictures, the photograph, taken by Eric Boman, featured many of the artists who were represented by the three galleries. With its expansive Chelsea horizon uncannily free of the crass condominiums that now dominate the once-desolate neighborhood, the image becomes a document of a time not quite fully gone by, but mostly.

The press release for Cain's posthumous exhibition referred to his new subject matter as a "radical departure," and rightly so; it noted that Cain had in essence taken up the much more traditional themes of landscape and portraiture.²³ Without a car in sight, the exhibition consisted of his two new series of works: the Sean paintings [pp. 115, 121, 127] and what have become known as the Los Angeles paintings [pp. 139–41, 145–49]. Based upon photographs taken by Cain, most likely from the vantage of a passenger seat, the six Los Angeles paintings depict nondescript storefronts and gas stations (three of each).²⁴

The show was met with great enthusiasm and melancholy. Many critics were quick to call it his best yet, while noting that the occasion was incredibly difficult. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl, writing for *The Village Voice*, praised the exhibition: "Now we see the beginning of the fulfillment of [Cain's promising] painterly gifts and obvious ambition in the same instant as its end: an exceptional talent nipped in mid-blossoming, just short of full bloom." Schjeldahl described the feeling and mood surrounding the exhibition most succinctly: "It makes for a singularly awkward occasion of celebration and mourning, hail and farewell."²⁵

The common narrative employed by writers after Cain's death was that in the last year of his life he had had a breakthrough that resulted in the creation of this stunning, career-making work just as, sadly, his career ended. More accurately, Cain had begun his Sean drawings in 1995, including them in his exhibition at Matthew Marks and in his section of the 1995 Biennial catalogue. His doing away with cars was a methodical and measured venture rather than an impetuous stroke of passion. The aforementioned portraits — based upon his 1995 drawings, consisting of three exquisite paintings of Sean — were a commanding shift in his practice. This evolution was entirely shocking, but the organizing principles of the work — defamiliarizing something we think we have a firm grasp of — were undeniably Cain's.

Immediately noticeable, the Los Angeles paintings do not contain any logos or typography; all of the signs have been emptied of their original content. Archival materials show that the original photographs were marked up, with some areas enlarged for further editing of the composition [fig. 16]. While many words were removed (or filled in, depending on one's disposition), other details were simply invented, a new tactic for the artist: a traffic cone added, the lines demarcating a parking spot slightly tweaked.

You get the feeling that Cain experienced a kind of liberation within these urban landscapes, equally desolate and teeming with activity. The paintings were created through a palpable sense of freedom. His brushwork is exuberant, his forms more peculiar than ever. A dense background of trees and shrubs in *Untitled Number Four* (1996) [p. 141] calls to mind Dunham's figures from the same time period and also foreshadows Dana Schutz's confident palette some seven years later. Even the brushwork of the painted asphalt in *Texaco* (1996) [fig. 17] recalls the quick, dry brushstrokes of Cain's earliest painting, the sense of liberation stemming from self-assuredness. The Los Angeles paintings carry the significance



Fig. 16
Study for Untitled Number Four, 1996
C-print and collage mounted on board
10 1/8 x 14 7/8 inches; 26 x 38 cm



Fig. 17
Texaco, 1996
Oil on canvas
37 x 57 inches; 94 x 145 cm



Fig. 18
Peter Cain's CD collection in his studio

and weight of the last works produced by the artist, representing all of the works that could have been made had he lived.

Two weeks after Cain's death, a photographer documented his studio before anything in it had been disturbed [pp. 6–13]. As Goldin said in her eulogy at Cain's memorial, it “looked like he'd just stepped out for a few minutes to buy more bananas.” Death provides unparalleled access. It takes everything from one's personal life and renders it public. Beginning with the posthumous photos of the studio, it's important to make a distinction between what Cain would and would not have allowed us to see (i.e., what he considered art and what he considered ephemera) were he still alive. Several unfinished works were found in the studio after his death.

The studio photos are incredibly telling documents of the artist's inner world. His studio CD collection offers a lovely picture of Cain as someone who kept up with what was hip at the time but also had his own personal taste: Nirvana, Sonic Youth, King Tubby, Hank Williams, Princess Superstar, some rock classics including Janis Joplin, and plenty of campy show tunes and gay nostalgia trips [fig. 18]. A box of saltines can be seen lying open on a table; a bag from the MoMA gift shop affixed with a delivery label sits on the floor near a pea-green Naugahyde armchair with a torn seat. Above Cain's drafting table is a cork bulletin board with several images and objects hanging from it; they include a photograph of Sean as a boy tacked next to a picture of a Sean painting, a photo of a car painting, and, nearby, an iconic Manet painting that hangs in the Metropolitan Museum, *The Dead Christ with Angels* (1864).

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A few of the individuals interviewed for this essay scoffed at the notion of considering the 1990s as a historical subject. Cain's death has confined his entire artistic output to that era, leaving it innocent of not only the global atrocities that have occurred since but also the triumphs we have come to take for granted. Twenty years on, when driverless cars are becoming a reality and photographs can be shot, altered, and disseminated instantaneously, Cain's iconic subjects have become less burdened with meaning. Today, in a historical moment that seems increasingly foreign, Cain's three distinct series — the cars, the Sean pictures, and Los Angeles landscapes — offer up his ability to abstract the quotidian while discreetly pushing the boundaries of painting.

Saturday Disaster, the title of a 1995 car painting, was lifted from a painting in Andy Warhol's early *Disaster* series [fig. 19]. Warhol's 1964 work contains two large silk-screened images of mangled bodies after a ghastly car wreck, while Cain's presents the tail end of a green car as if it were sinking nose-first into some body of water. The appropriation of the title says much about his ambition to be worthy of Warhol's influence. Yet the contradictory title phrase — a day of relaxation and freedom conflated with misfortune and tragedy — could also describe Cain's final years. Stopped short just as it was growing in self-assurance and perspicacity, the true nature of his work remains undetermined, each painting a possible relic to be imbued with meaning — a bittersweet consolation.



Fig. 19
Andy Warhol
Saturday Disaster, 1964
Synthetic polymer paint and
silk-screen ink on canvas
119 x 82 inches; 302 x 208 cm
Rose Museum at Brandeis University

NOTES

1. David Carr and Robert Ryman, "Robert Ryman on the Origins of His Art," *Burlington Magazine* 139, no. 1134 (September 1997), pp. 632–33. Cited in Suzanne P. Hudson, *Robert Ryman: Used Paint* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).
2. Michael Kimmelman, "A Quirky Whitney Biennial," *The New York Times*, March 24, 1995.
3. Carroll Dunham, "Head Over Wheels," *Artforum*, April 1997, pp. 19–20.
4. Angela Stewart, "Peter Cain, 37, Rising Young Artist," *Sunday Star Ledger*, January 7, 1997, p. 21.
5. Frank Camarda in conversation with the author, August 28, 2016.
6. Scott Rothkopf, "Paul Thek and the Sixties Surreal," in Elisabeth Sussman and Lynn Zelevansky, *Paul Thek: Diver* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 46–55.
7. Simon Watson in conversation with the author, August 18, 2016.
8. Nan Goldin, eulogy for Peter Cain delivered at the Whitney Museum of American Art, March 10, 1997.
9. Grace Glueck, "Review: Peter Cain at Matthew Marks Gallery," *New York Observer*, January 18, 1993.
10. Simon Taylor, "Peter Cain at Simon Watson," *Art in America*, November 1991, pp. 150–51.
11. See Bob Nickas's take on Cain's removal of the human, "Re-Make/Re-Model: The Car Paintings of Peter Cain" in *Peter Cain: More Courage and Less Oil* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2002). Robert Moor recently limned the potential effects of driverless cars on American society in "What Happens to American Myth When You Take the Driver Out of It? The Self-Driving Car and the Future of the Self," *New York Magazine*, October 17–30, 2016, p. 36.
12. Carroll Dunham in conversation with the author, August 13, 2016. While there are slides of Cain's work in the Pat Hearn Gallery Archives at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, there are no mentions of Cain's show.
13. Jerry Saltz, "Wild Thing," *Arts Magazine*, March 1990, pp. 13–14.
14. Klaus Kertess, "Cartography," exhibition brochure (New York: Simon Watson, 1991).
15. "Robert Ryman," October 7, 1988–June 18, 1989, Dia Center for the Arts, New York.
16. See Glueck, op. cit. Also Tony Raczka, "Defamiliarizing an American Icon," *Artweek*, November 15, 1990, pp. 14–15.
17. Roberta Smith, "Review: Peter Cain at Simon Watson," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1991.
18. Joshua Decter, "Review: Peter Cain at Simon Watson," *Arts Magazine*, September 1991, p. 77. David Cronenberg's movie adaptation of Ballard's novel was released in the US a few months after Cain's death.
19. Cain crossed the lowbrow paper's threshold thanks to Cindy Adams and her gossip column. Adams supposedly started a feud between Cain and longtime friend Jack Pierson by reporting that the popular band the Black Crowes had shot a music video at Pierson's West 42nd Street loft, when they had actually filmed at Cain's new Bowery studio. "When both were on their backs they were pals. Now they're up-and-coming. And rivals." Cindy Adams, *New York Post*, December 1, 1992, p. 10.
20. Alexi Worth, "The Trouble with Christian: Whatever Happened to Christian Leigh," *Artforum*, March 2003.
21. For many years this work was erroneously titled *EP 110*. The mistake was discovered and corrected in 2016 during the creation of the artist's online catalogue raisonné, www.petercain.org.
22. James Rondeau in conversation with the author, September 24, 2016.
23. Press release for the 1997 Matthew Marks exhibition.
24. Terry Myers offers insight into the source imagery in "Running on Full," *Peter Cain: The Los Angeles Pictures* (Cologne and New York: Galerie Aurel Scheibler and Matthew Marks Gallery, 2005).
25. Peter Schjeldahl, "Hail and Farewell," *The Village Voice*, February 25, 1997.

Untitled, 1987
Oil on linen
42 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 36 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches; 107 x 92 cm





Satellite, 1988
Oil on linen
90 x 34 inches; 229 x 86 cm



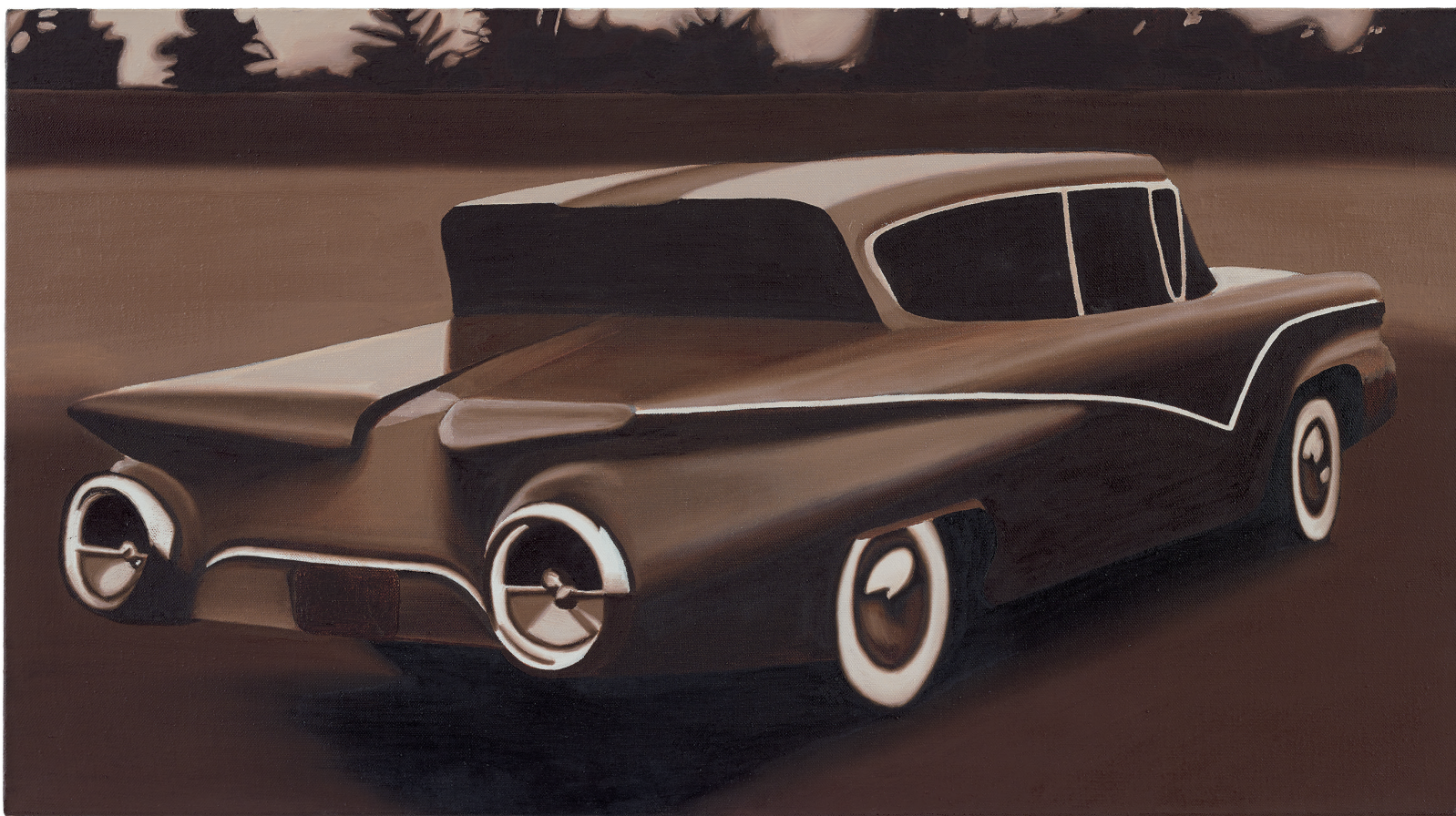
Untitled, 1988
Oil on linen
90 x 34 inches; 229 x 86 cm

Untitled, 1988
Oil on canvas
28 x 76 inches; 71 x 193 cm

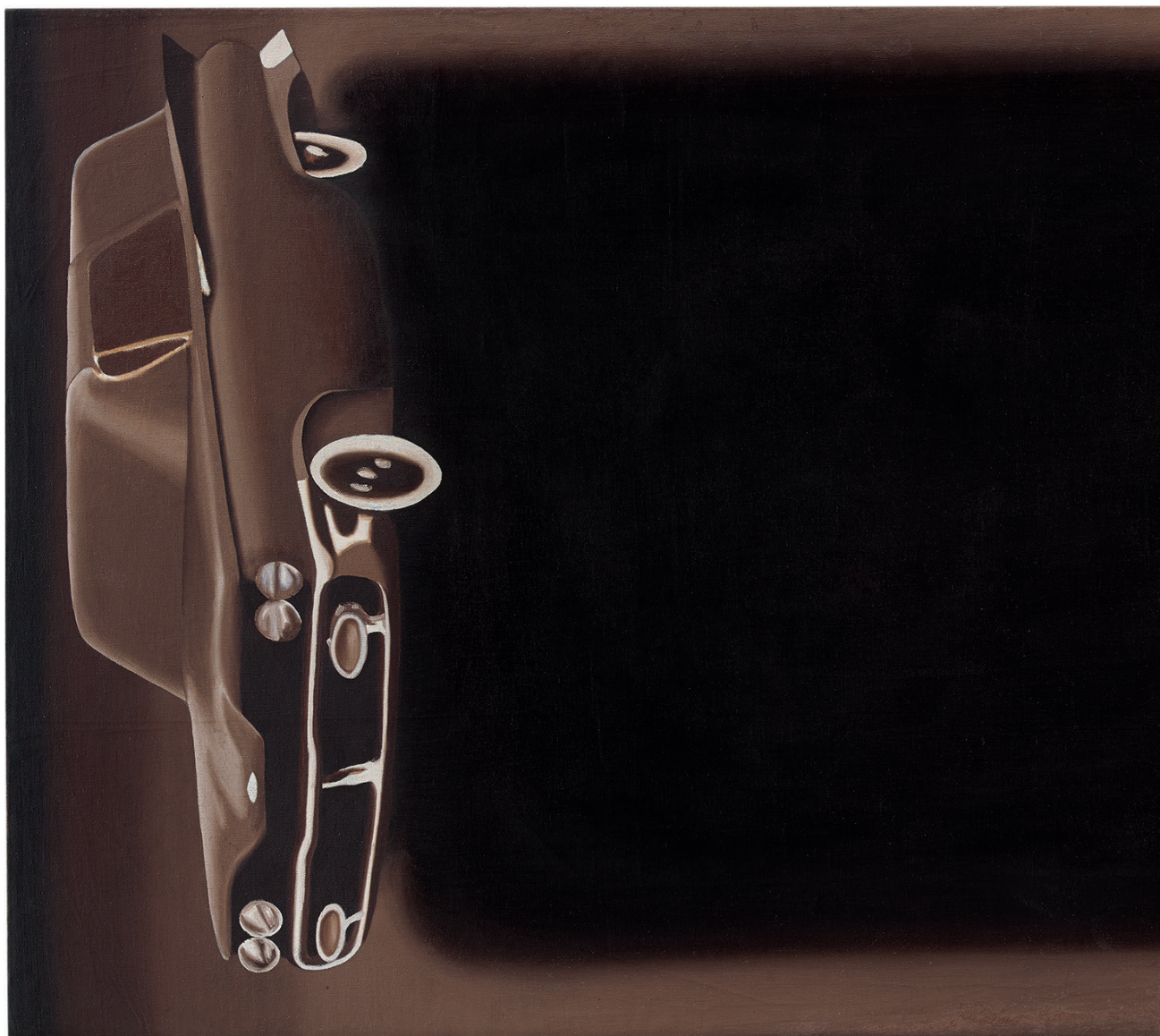




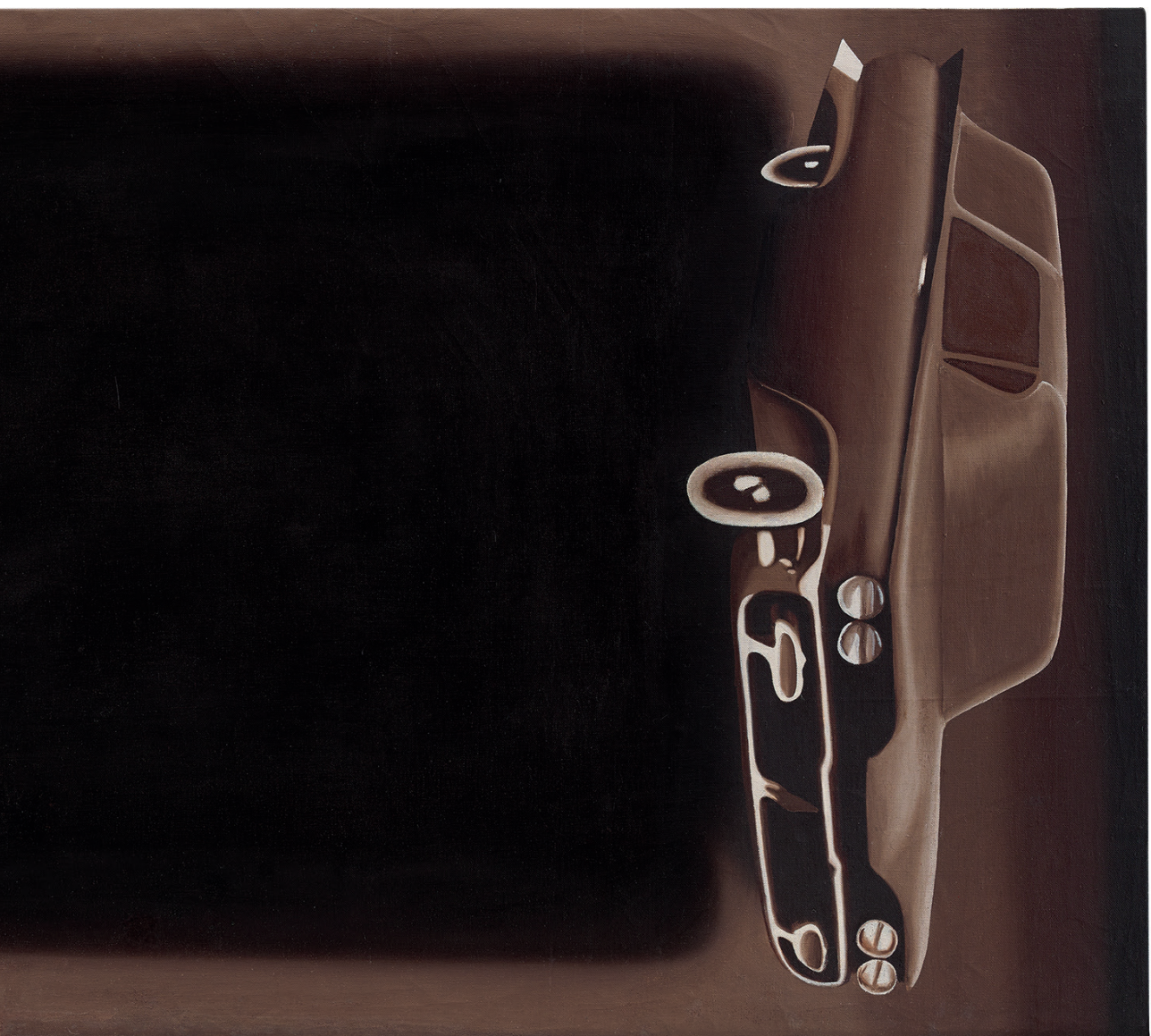
Untitled, 1988
Oil on linen
20 x 36 inches; 51 x 91 cm



Untitled, 1988–89
Oil on linen
20 x 36 inches; 51 x 91 cm



Untitled, 1988–89
Oil on linen
35 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 79 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; 91 x 203 cm



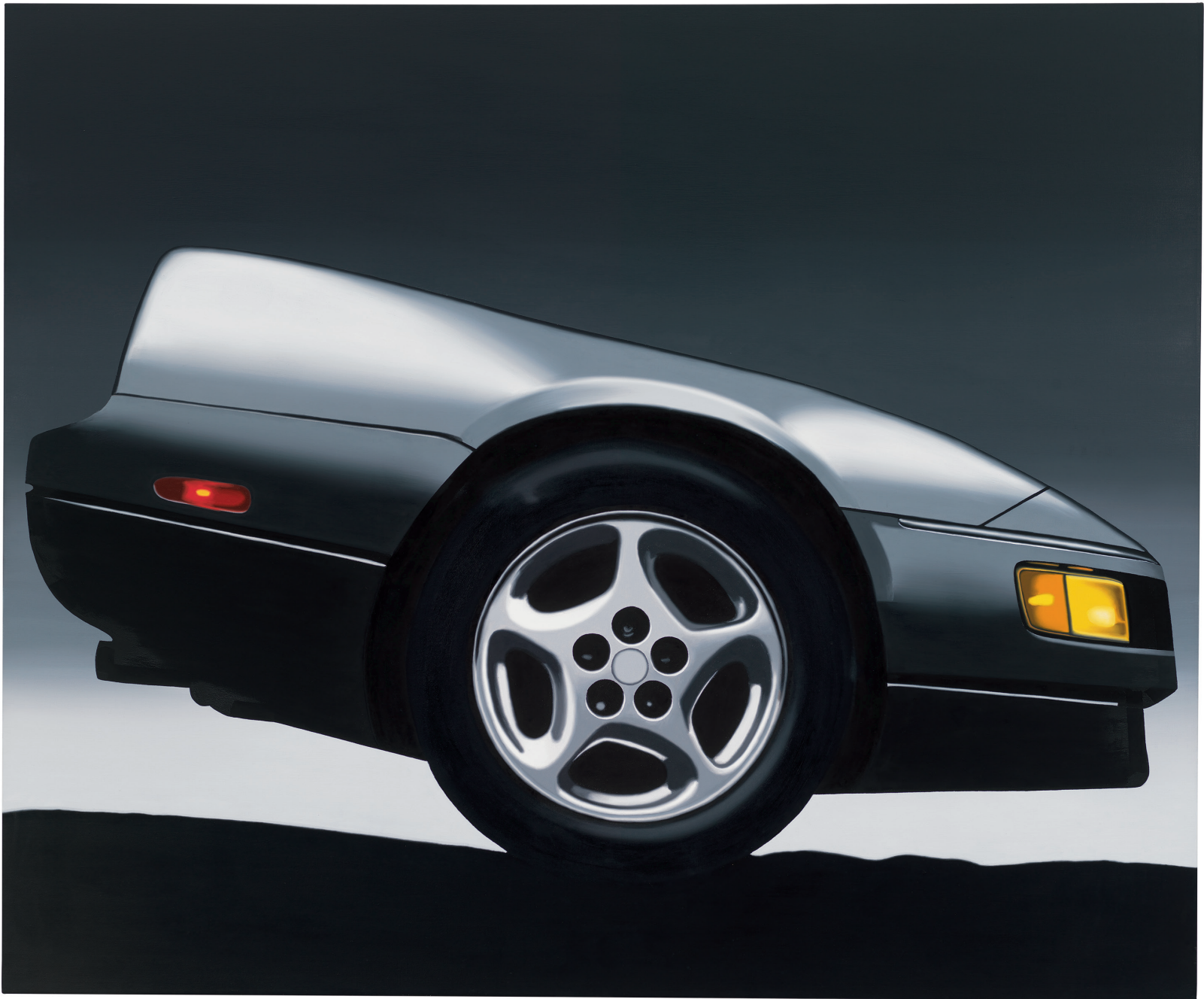
Untitled, 1989
Oil on linen
46 x 44 inches; 117 x 112 cm



Untitled, 1989
Oil on canvas
60 x 34 inches; 152 x 86 cm

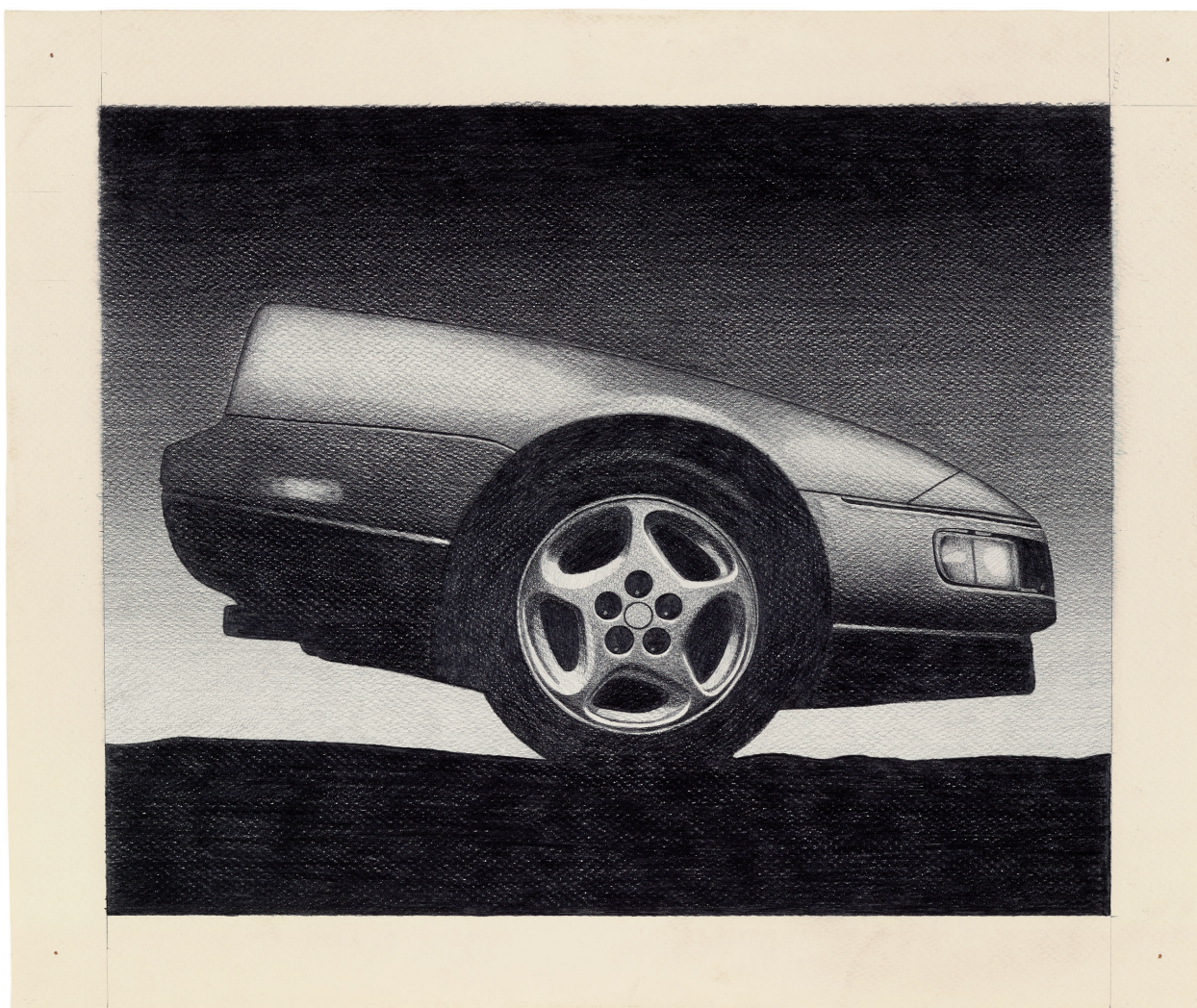


Z, 1989
Oil on canvas
58 x 70 inches; 147 x 178 cm
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchase,
with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee



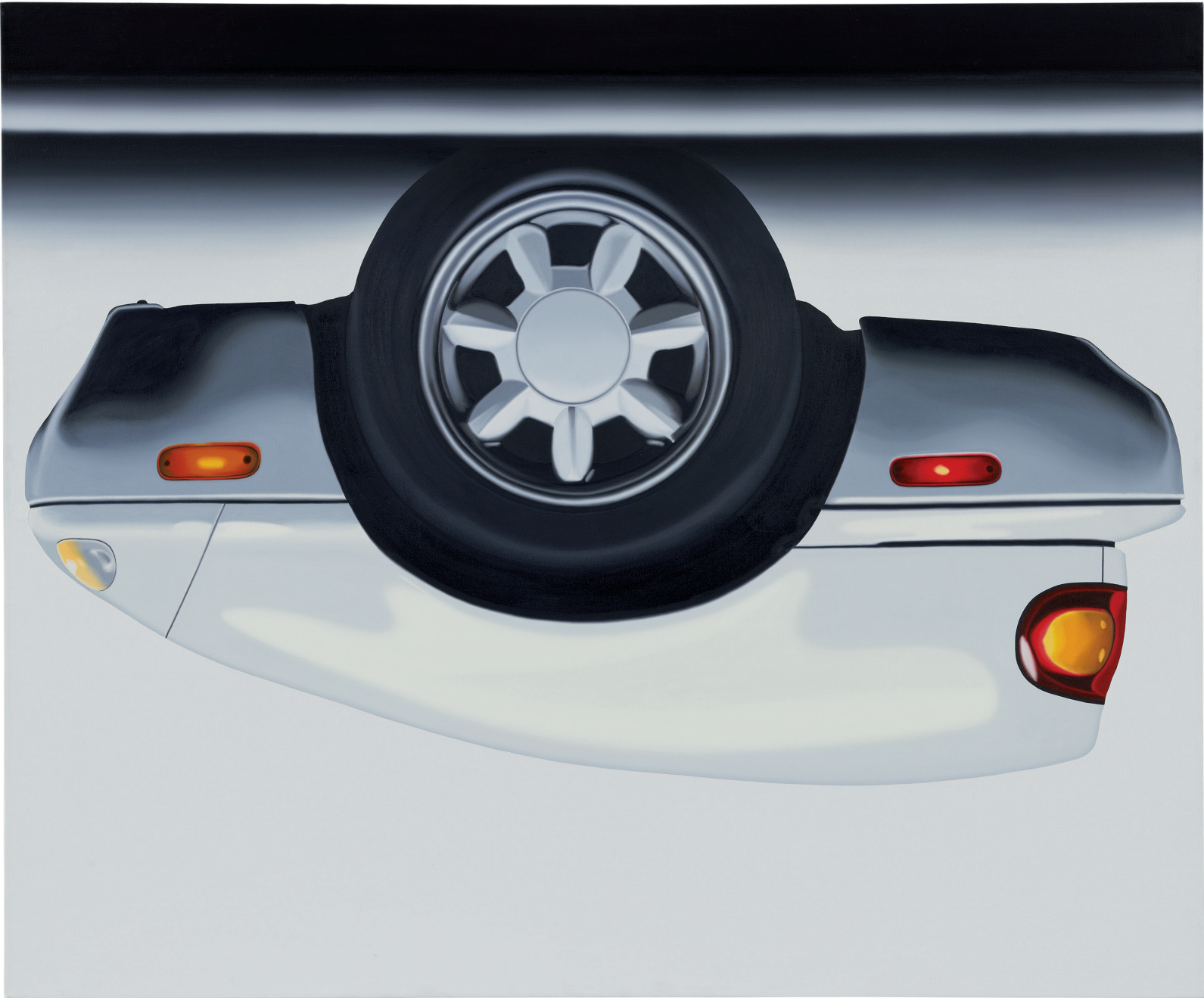


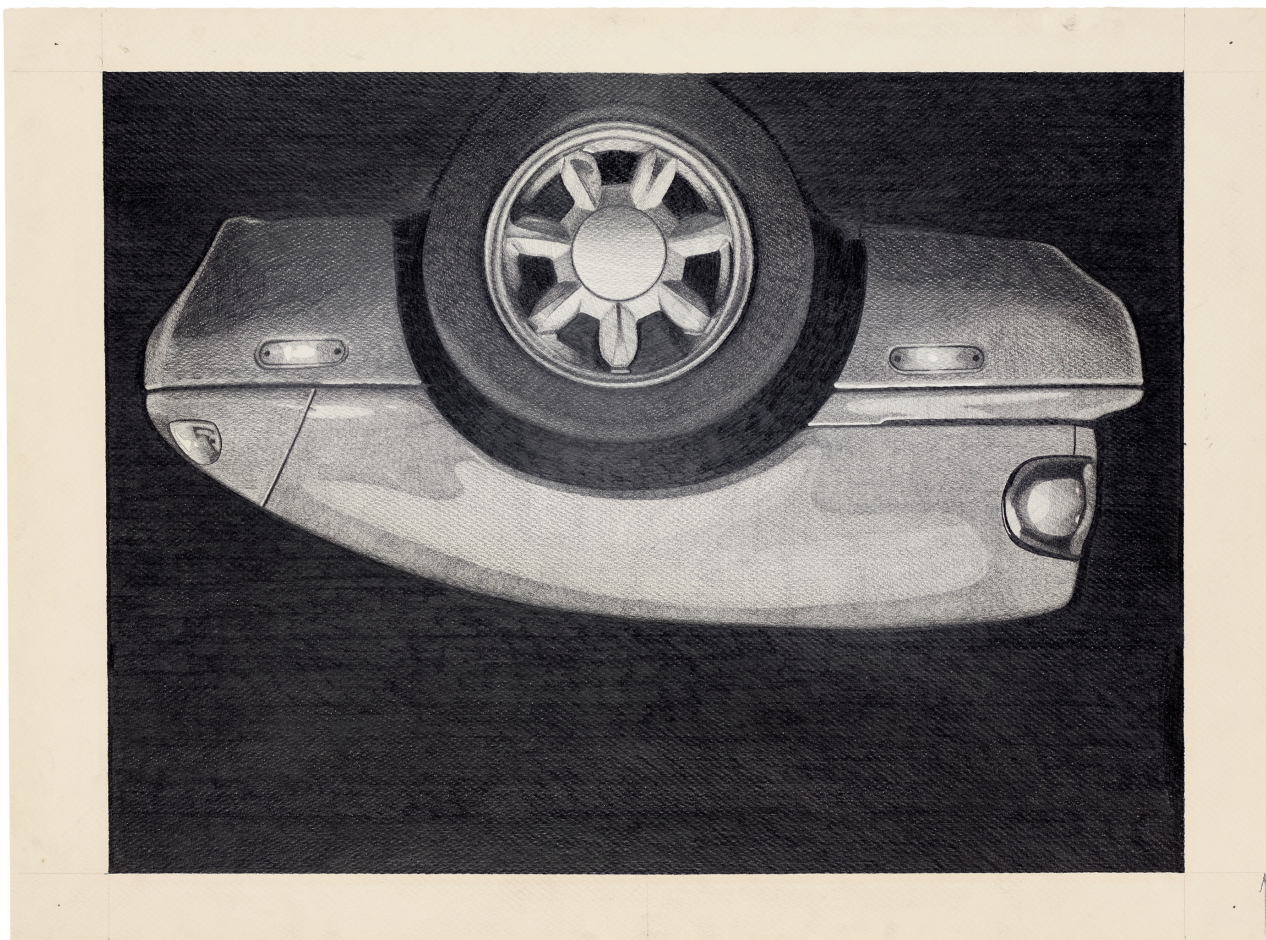
Study for Z, 1989
Collage
10½ x 13 inches; 27 x 33 cm



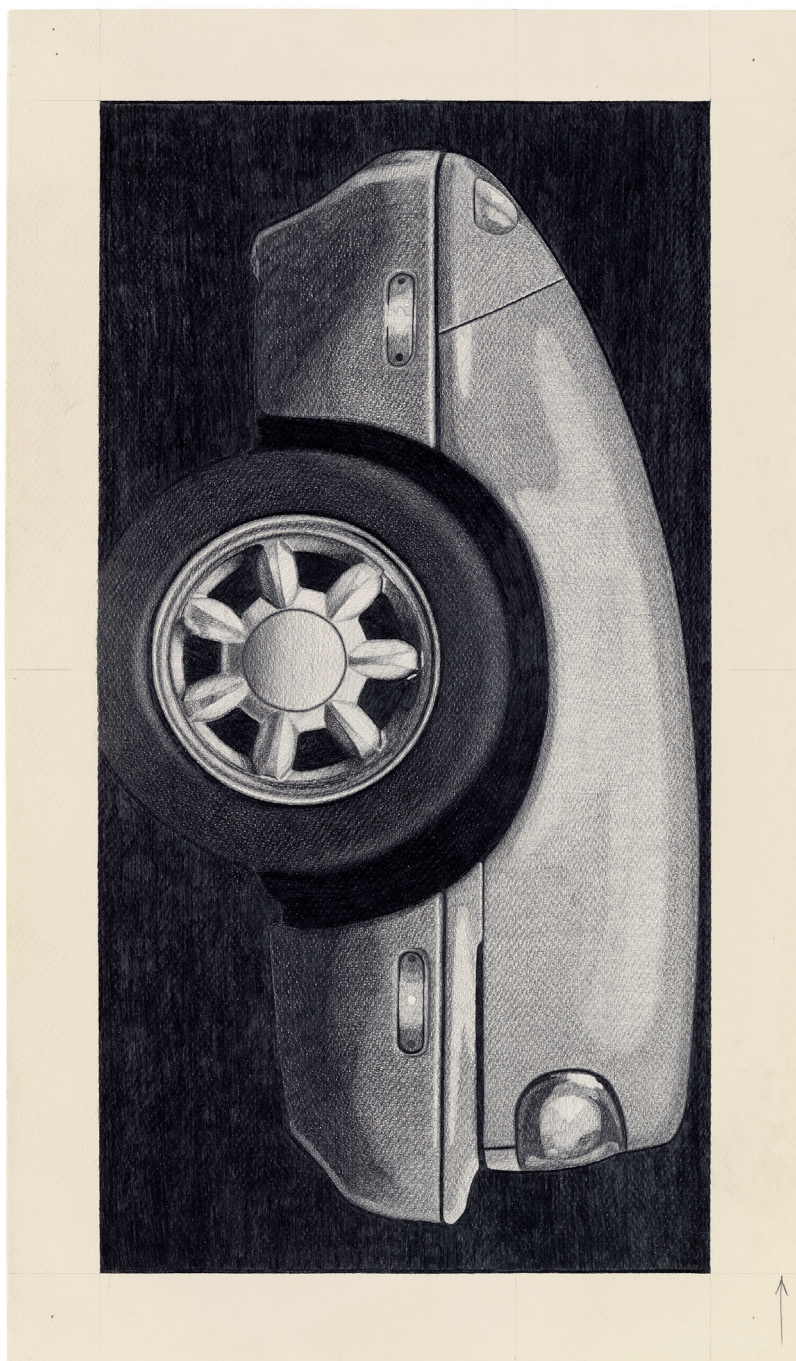
Z, 1990
Graphite on paper
16½ x 20½ inches; 42 x 52 cm

Untitled, 1990
Oil on canvas
58 x 70 inches; 147 x 178 cm



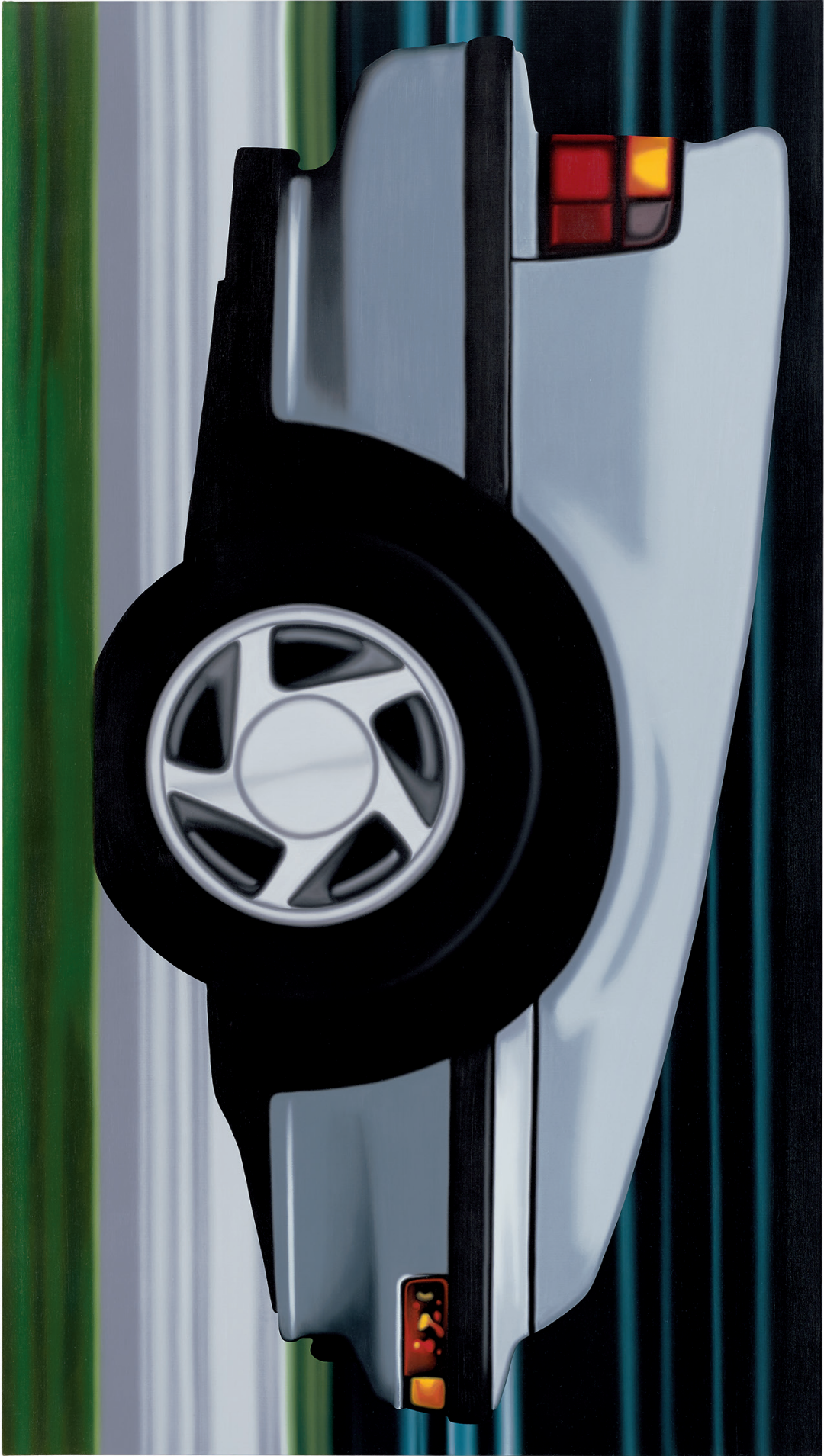


Miata, 1990
Graphite on paper
22 x 31 inches; 56 x 78 cm
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Gift of Richmond Burton in memory of Peter Cain



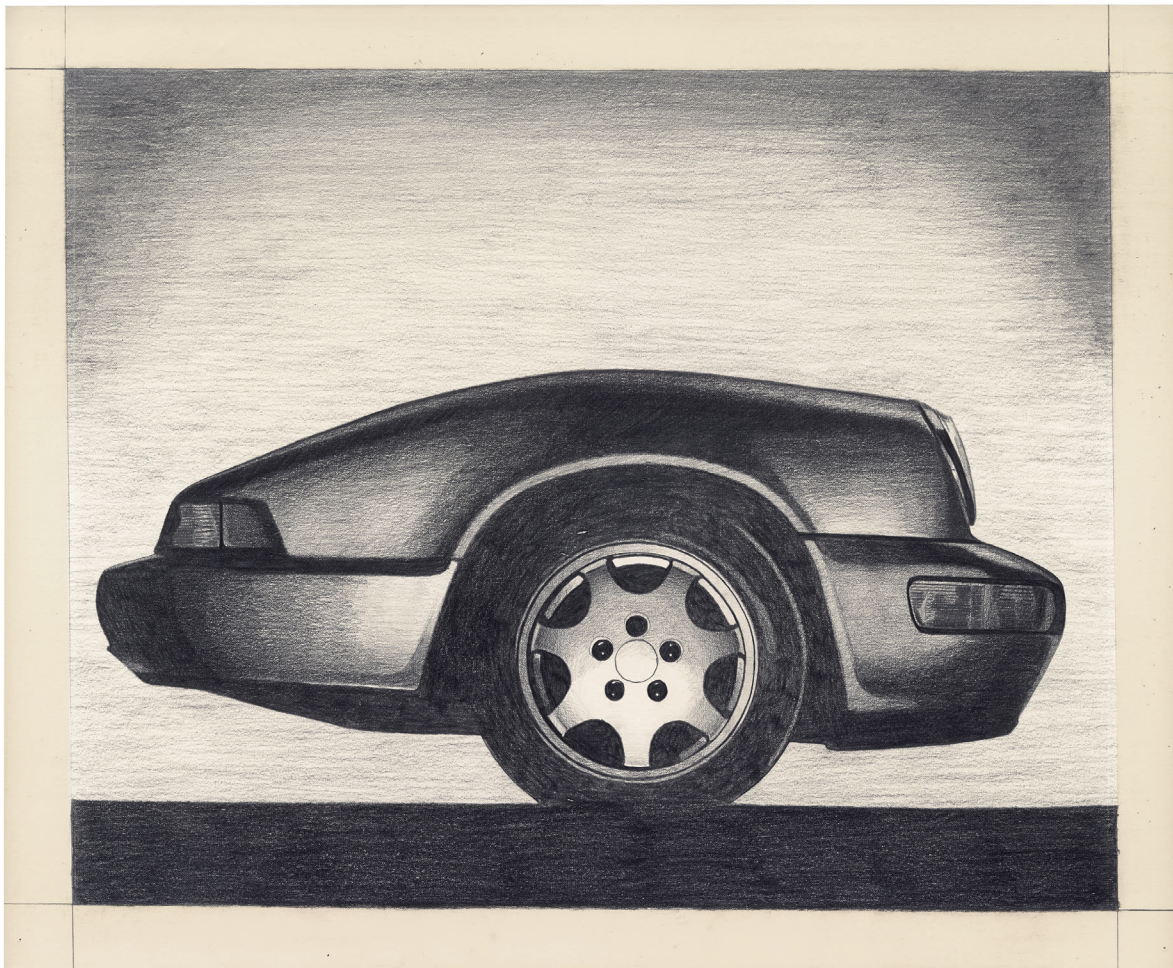
Miata, 1990
Graphite on paper
29½ x 17¼ inches; 75 x 44 cm

Prelude #3, 1990
Oil on linen
85 x 48 inches; 216 x 122 cm

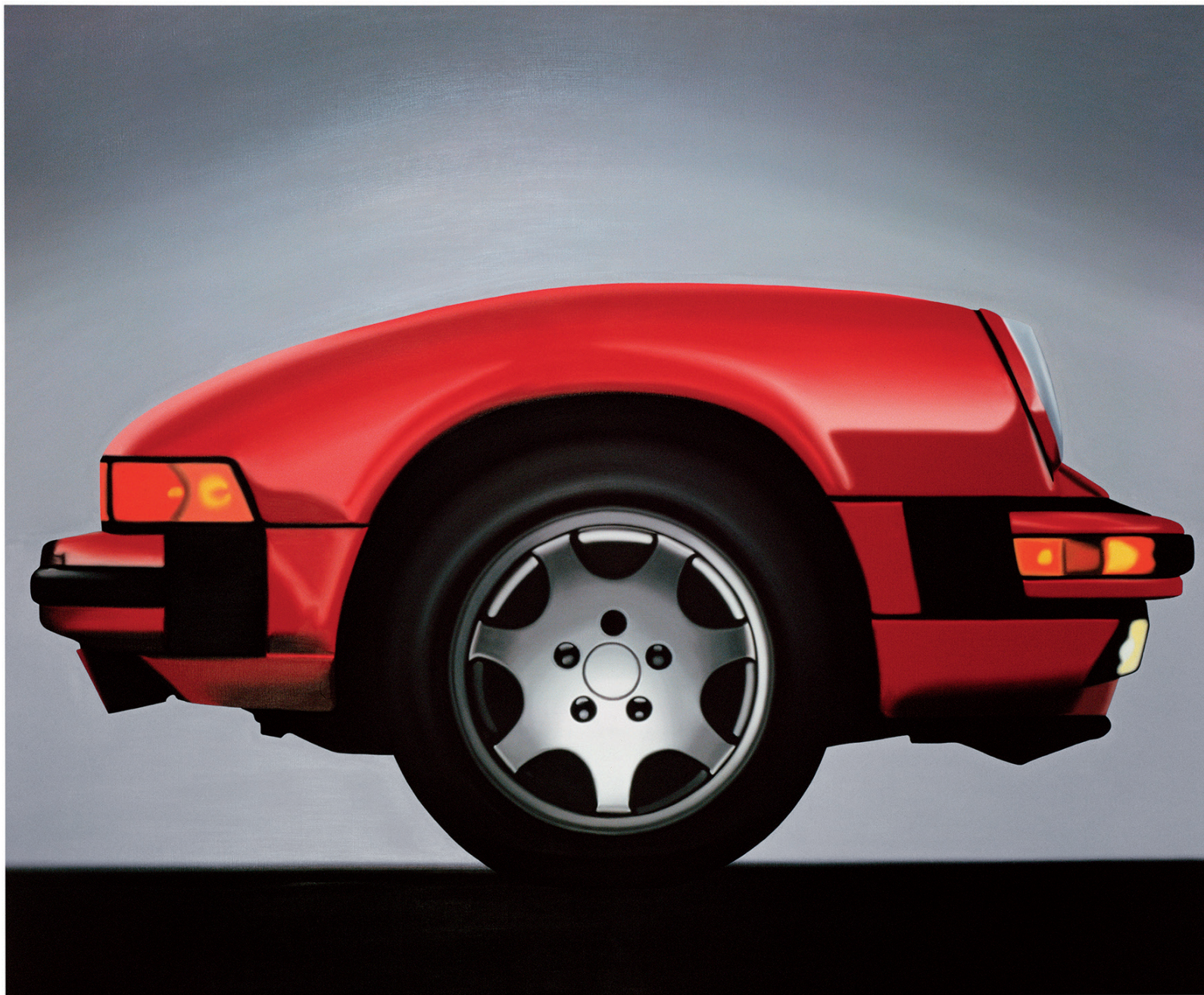


Prelude #1, 1990
Oil on linen
102 x 48 inches; 259 x 122 cm





Carrera #4, 1990
Graphite on paper
20 x 23⁷/₈ inches; 51 x 61 cm



Carrera 911 Turbo #1, 1991
Oil on canvas
58 x 70 inches; 147 x 178 cm

500 SL #1, 1992
Oil on linen
67 x 70 inches; 170 x 178 cm
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Promised gift of Emily Fisher Landau

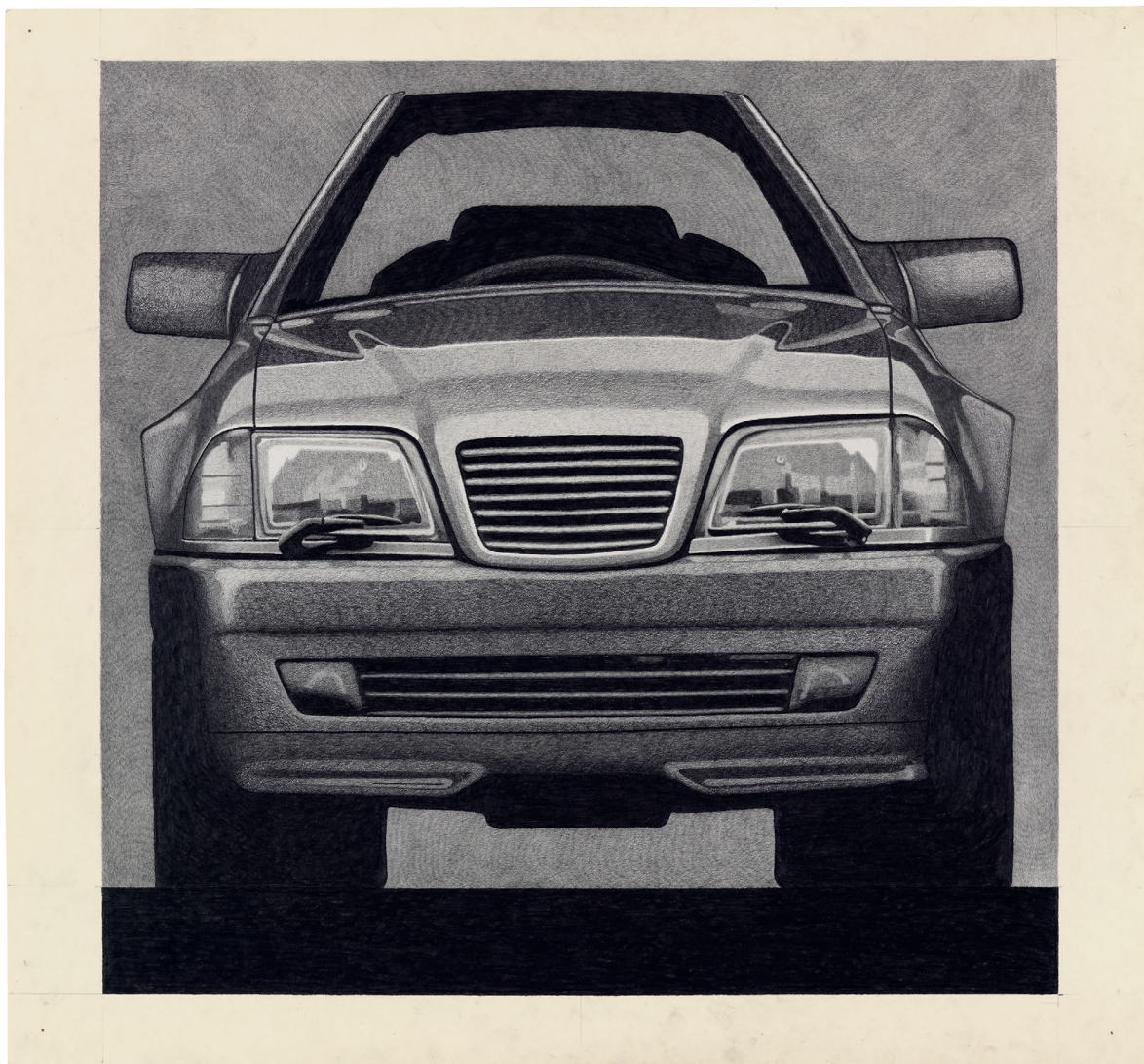




Study for 500 SL #5, 1991
Collage
8½ x 8¾ inches; 22 x 21 cm



Study for 500 SL #3, 1991
Collage
8½ x 8¾ inches; 22 x 21 cm



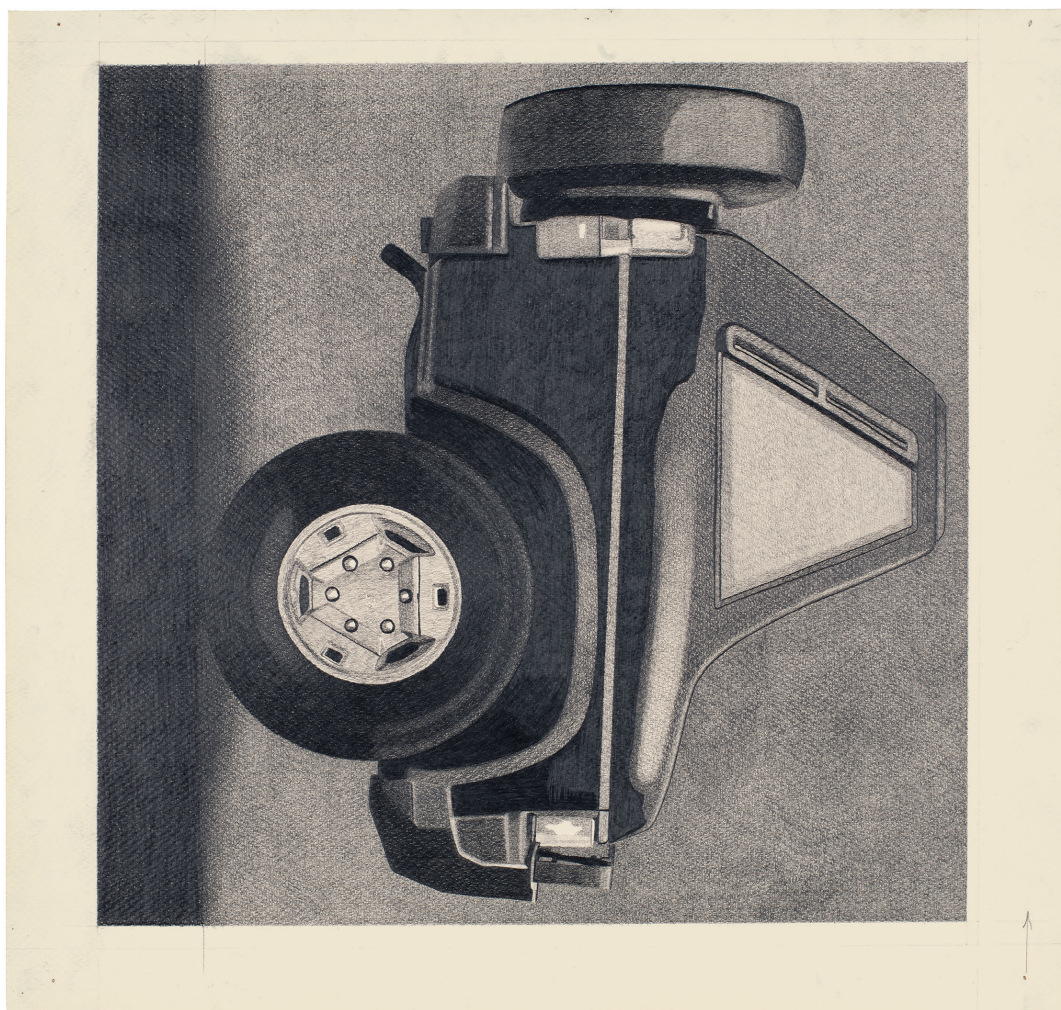
500 SL #5, 1991
Graphite on paper
24 x 24 inches; 61 x 61 cm

500 SL #2, 1992
Oil on linen
67 x 70 inches; 170 x 178 cm

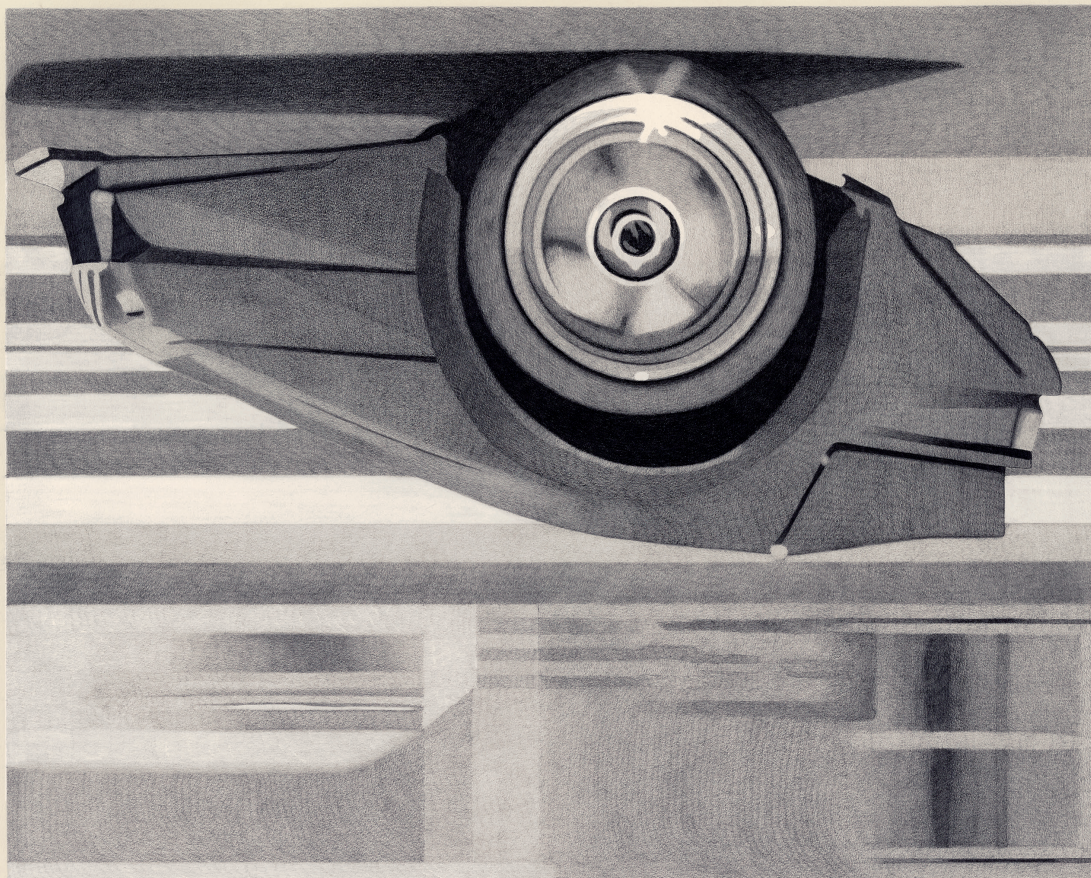


Pathfinder, 1993
Oil on linen
92 x 93 inches; 234 x 236 cm
The Art Institute of Chicago.
Through prior gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin E. Hokin





Pathfinder, 1991
Graphite on paper
26 x 26 inches; 66 x 66 cm

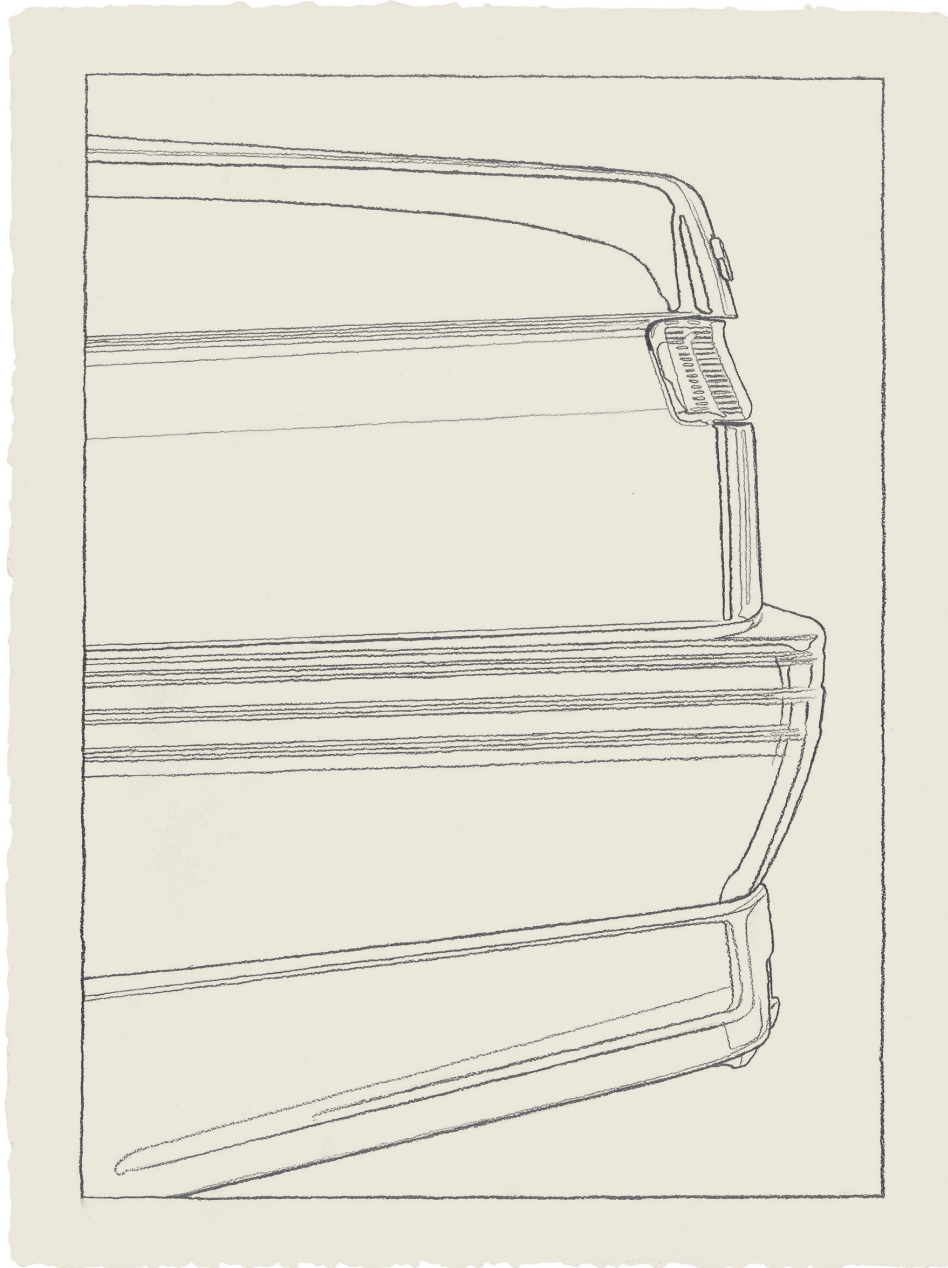


EB 110, 1993
Graphite on paper
29½ x 35¾ inches; 75 x 91 cm

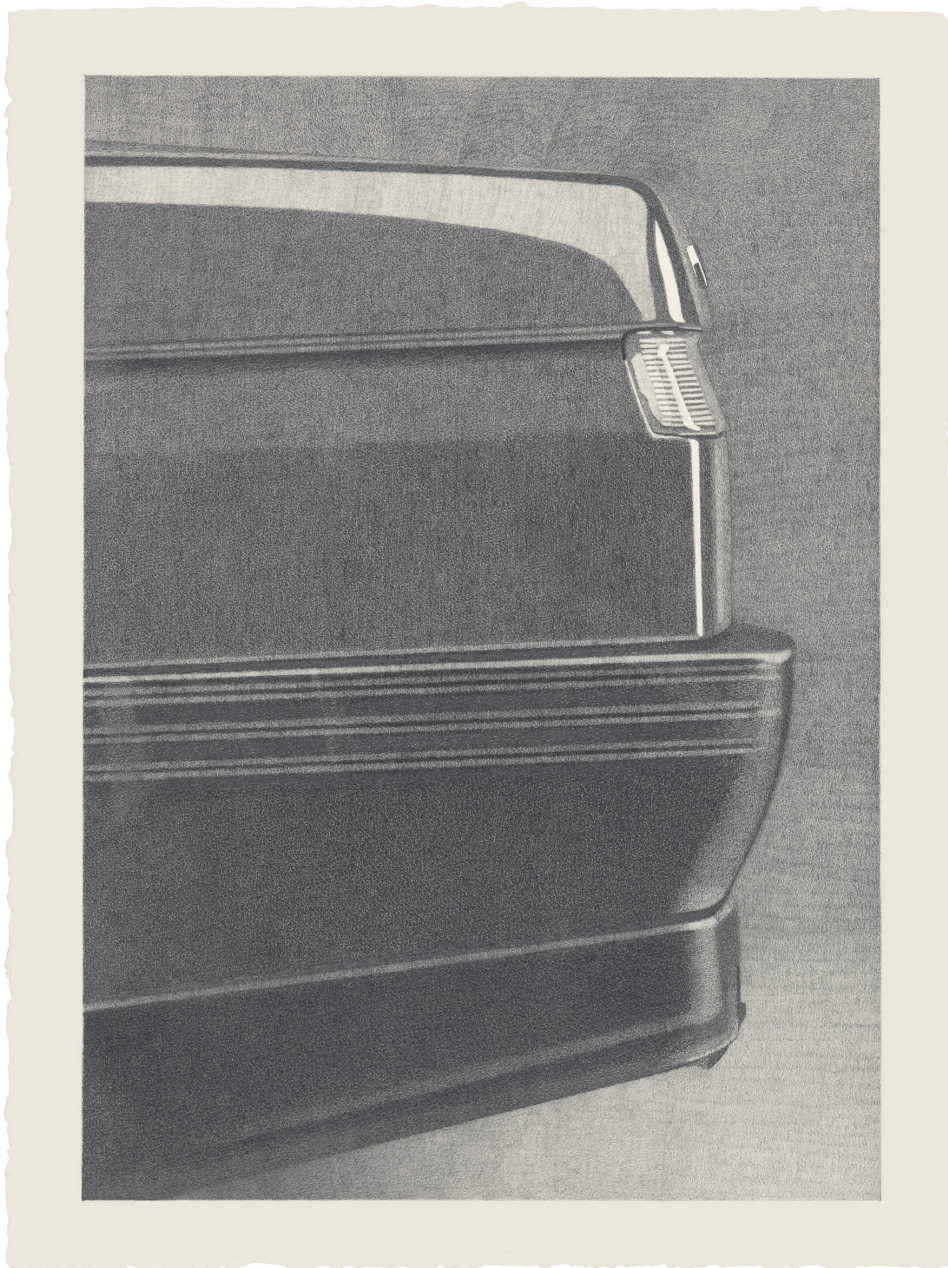
EB 110, 1993
Oil on linen
90 x 110 inches; 229 x 279 cm





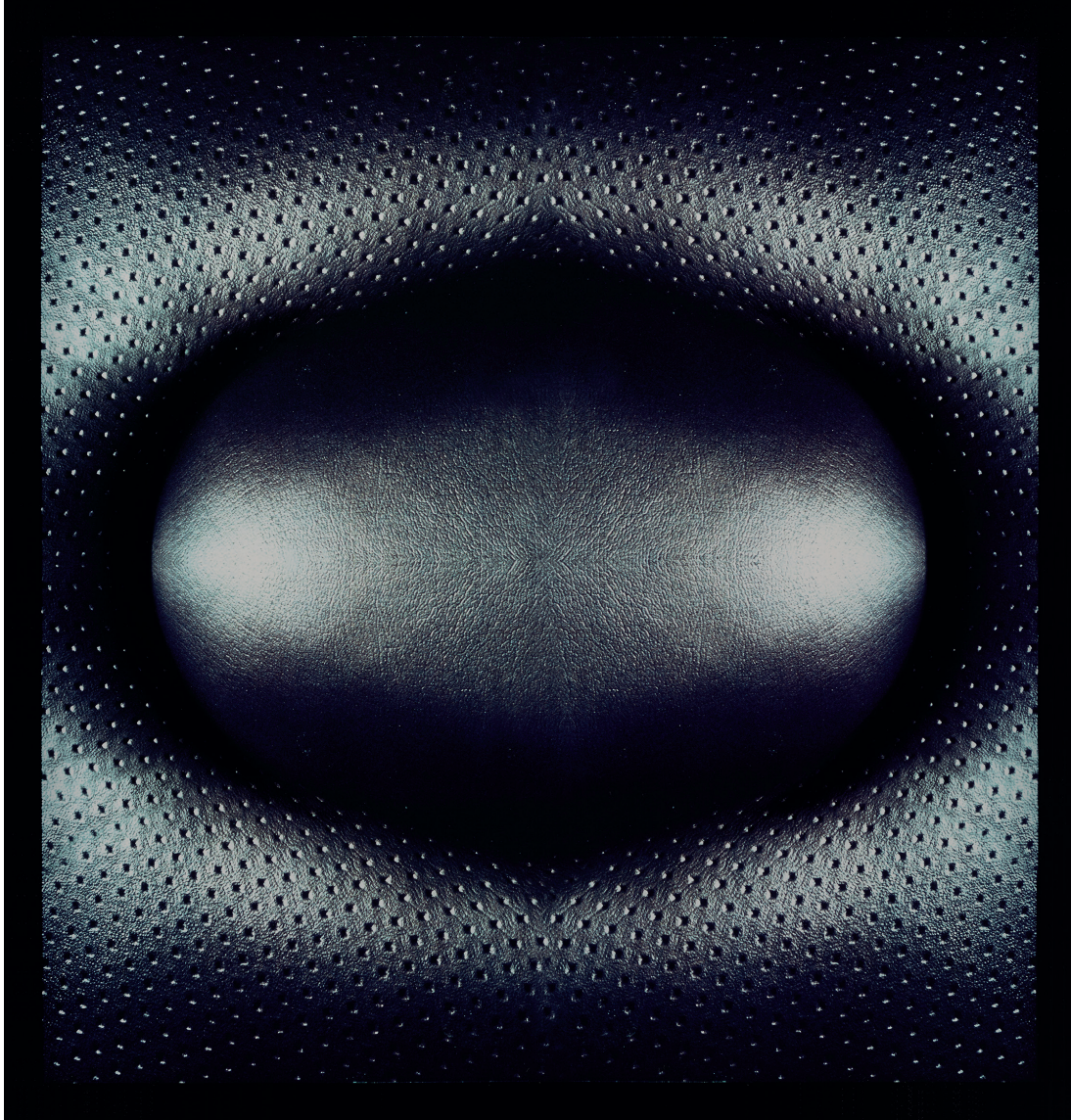


Coward, 1993
Graphite on paper
30¼ x 22¾ inches; 77 x 58 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
The Judith Rothschild Foundation
Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift



Coward, 1993
Graphite on paper
30¼ x 22¾ inches; 77 x 58 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
The Judith Rothschild Foundation
Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift

Bonneville, 1993
Cibachrome mounted on aluminum
33½ x 32 inches; 85 x 81 cm



Mustang, 1992–94
Oil on linen
18 x 46 inches; 46 x 117 cm





Beaumont, 1992–94
Oil on linen
18 x 46 inches; 46 x 117 cm



Thunderbird, 1994
Oil on linen
18 x 46 inches; 46 x 117 cm

Charger, 1992–94
Oil on linen
18 x 46 inches; 46 x 117 cm



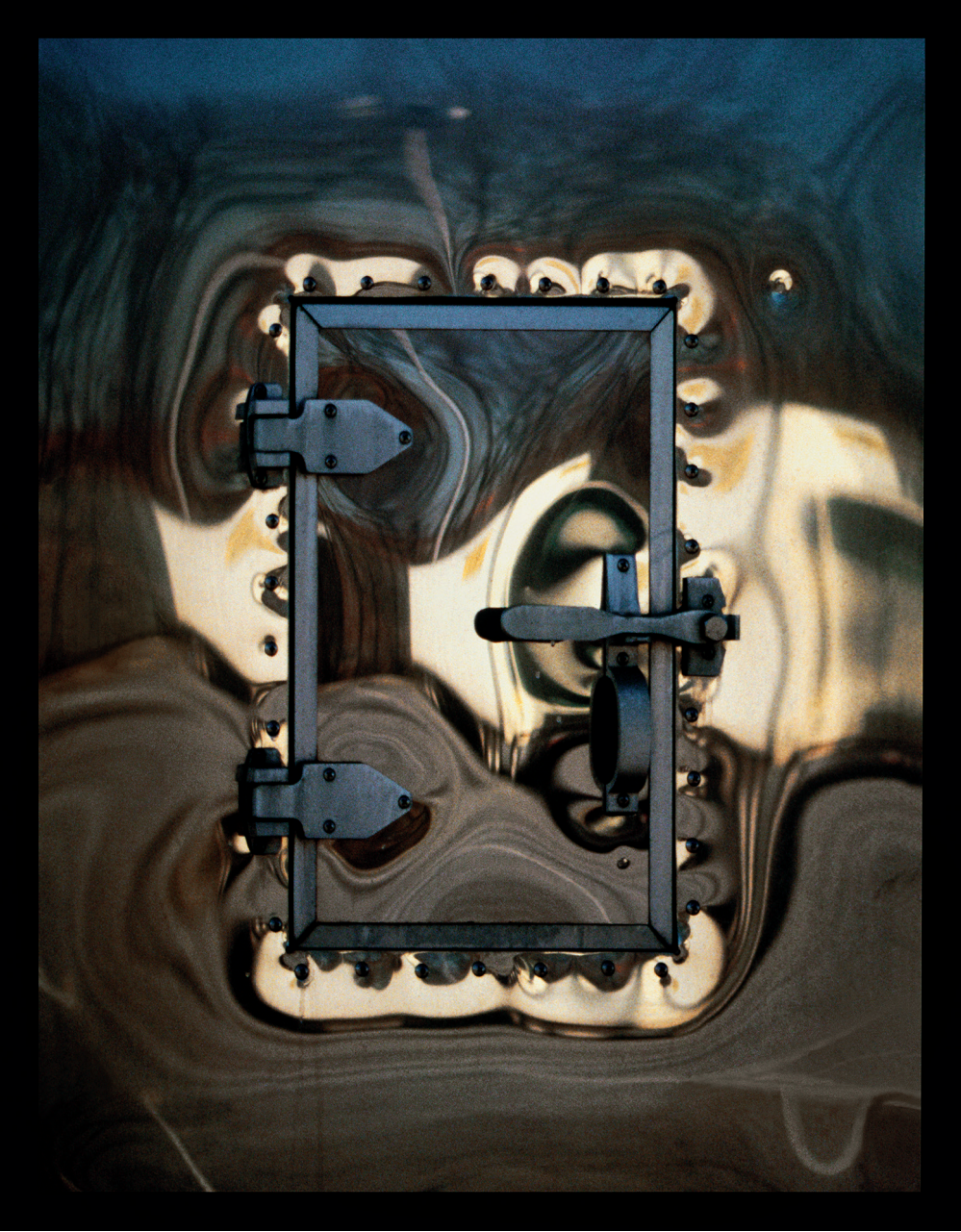


Continental, 1994
Oil on linen
18 x 46 inches; 46 x 117 cm



Toronto, 1994
Oil on linen
18 x 46 inches; 46 x 117 cm

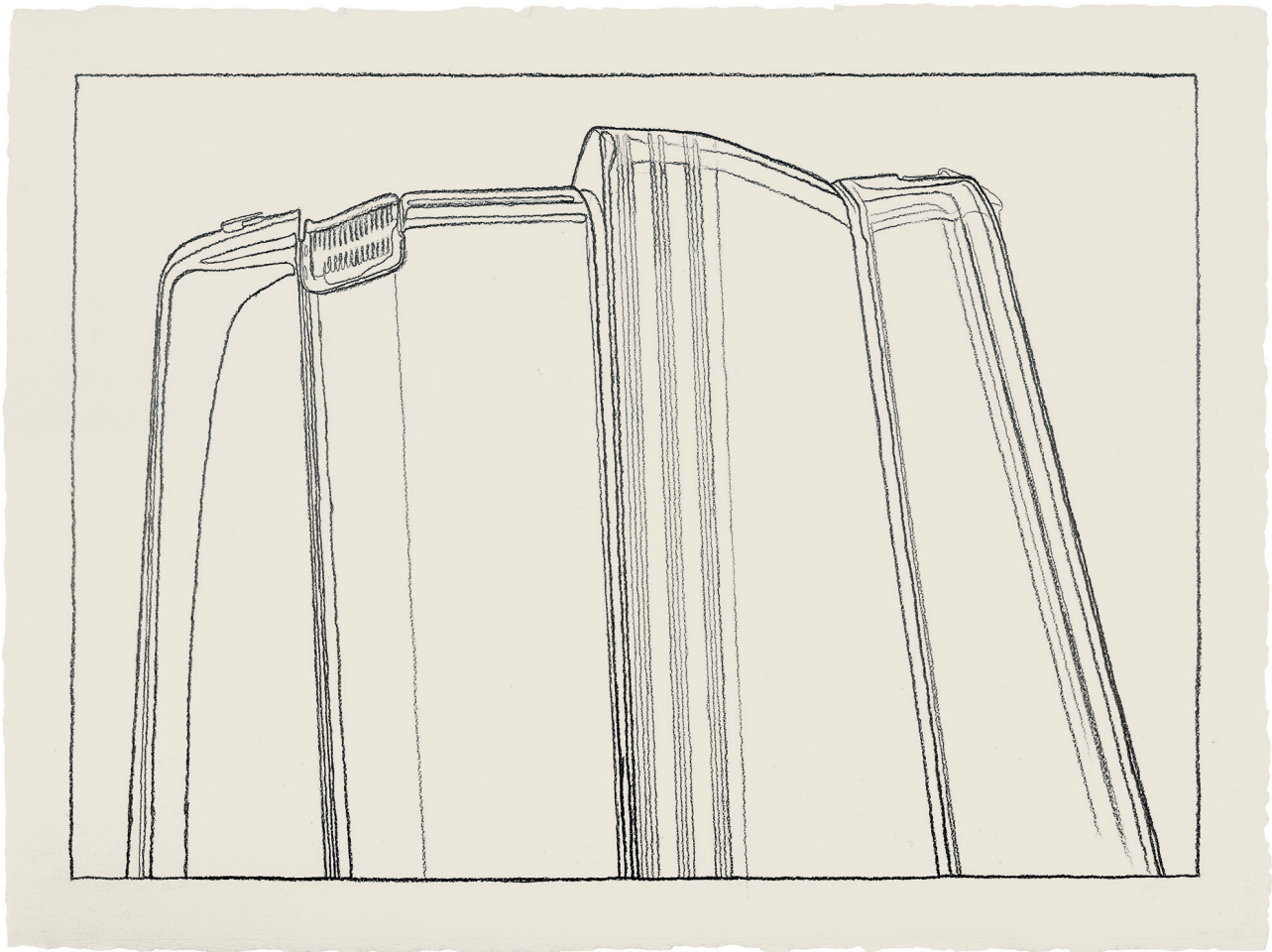
Untitled, 1994–95
Cibachrome mounted on aluminum
40 x 30 inches; 102 x 76 cm

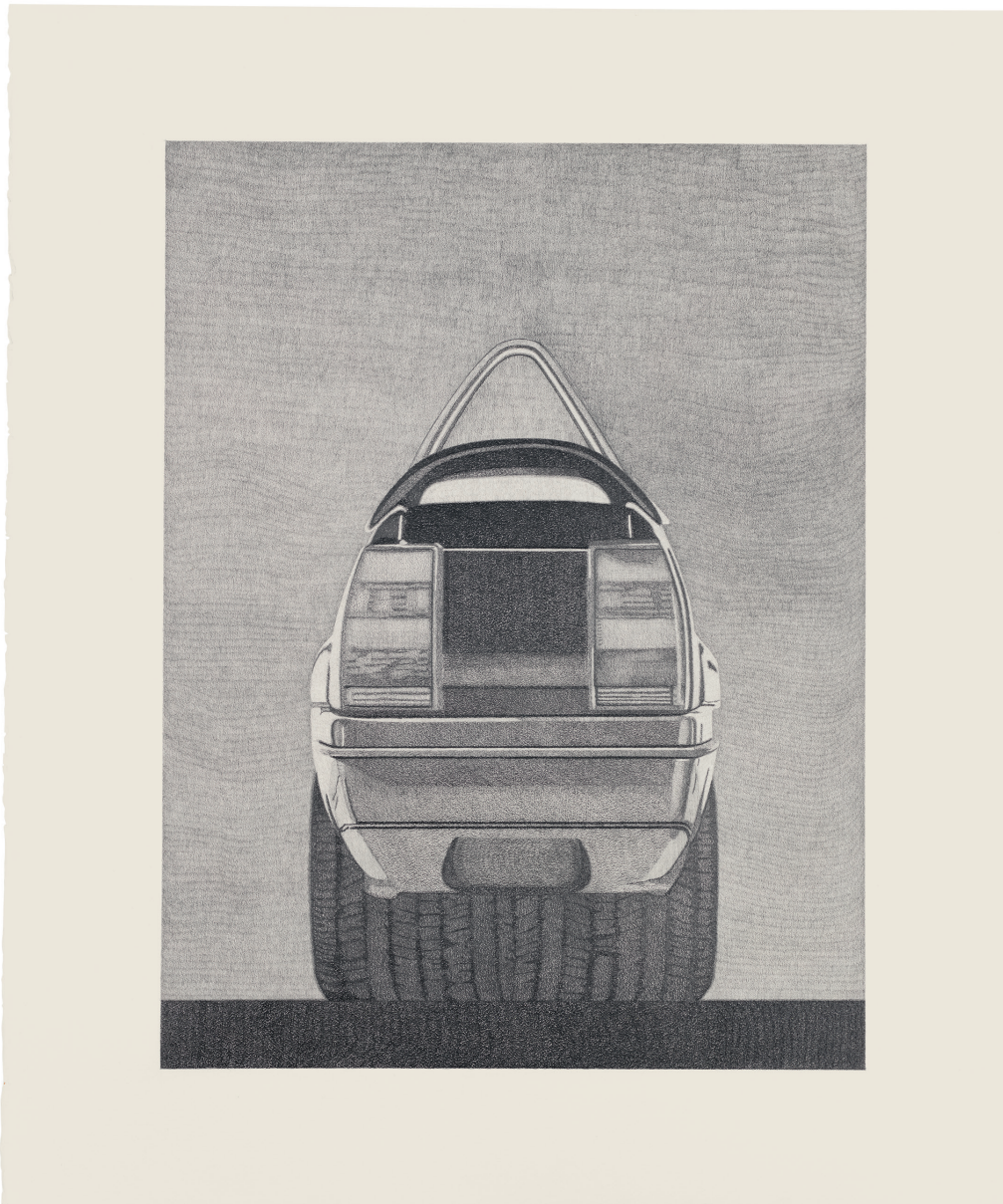


Saturday Disaster, 1994
Oil on linen
63 x 83 inches; 160 x 211 cm



Saturday Disaster, 1993
Graphite on paper
22½ x 30 inches; 57 x 76 cm





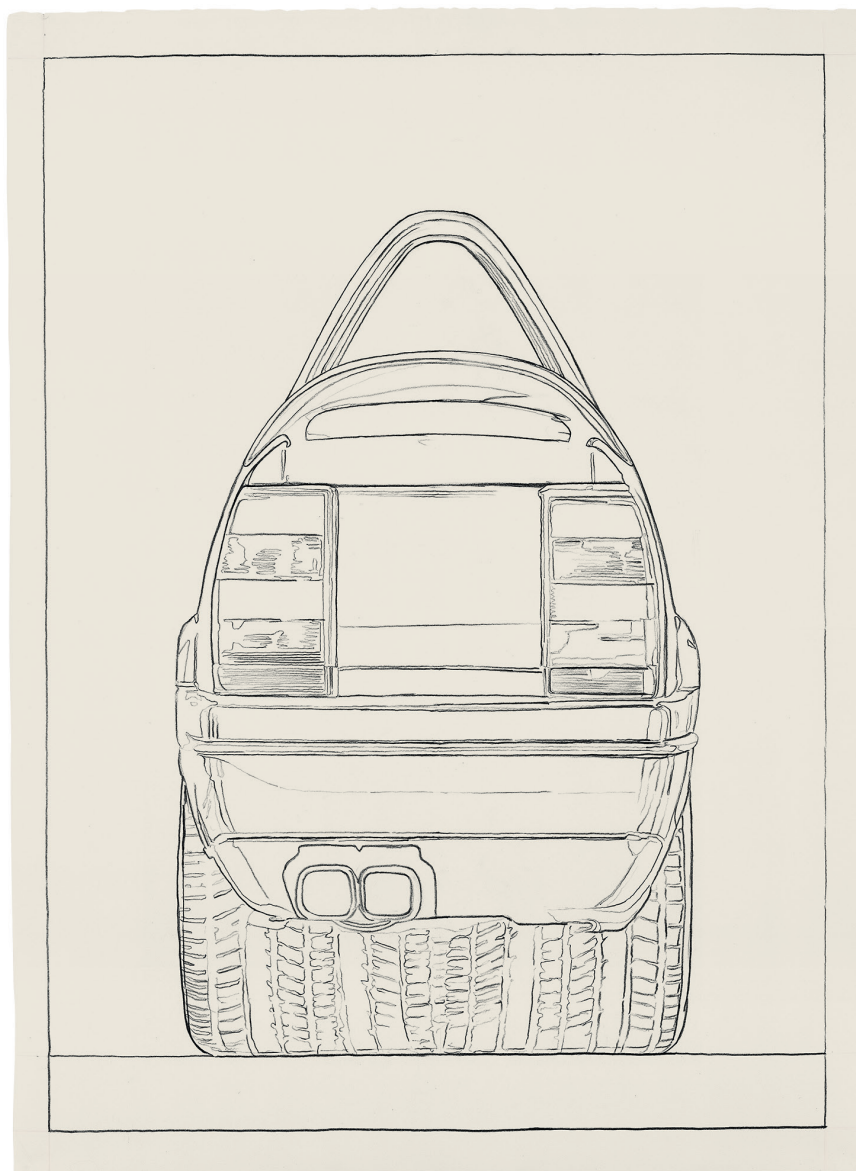
The Little Colonel, 1993
Graphite on paper
48 x 40 1/4 inches; 122 x 102 cm
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Purchase, with funds from the Drawing Committee



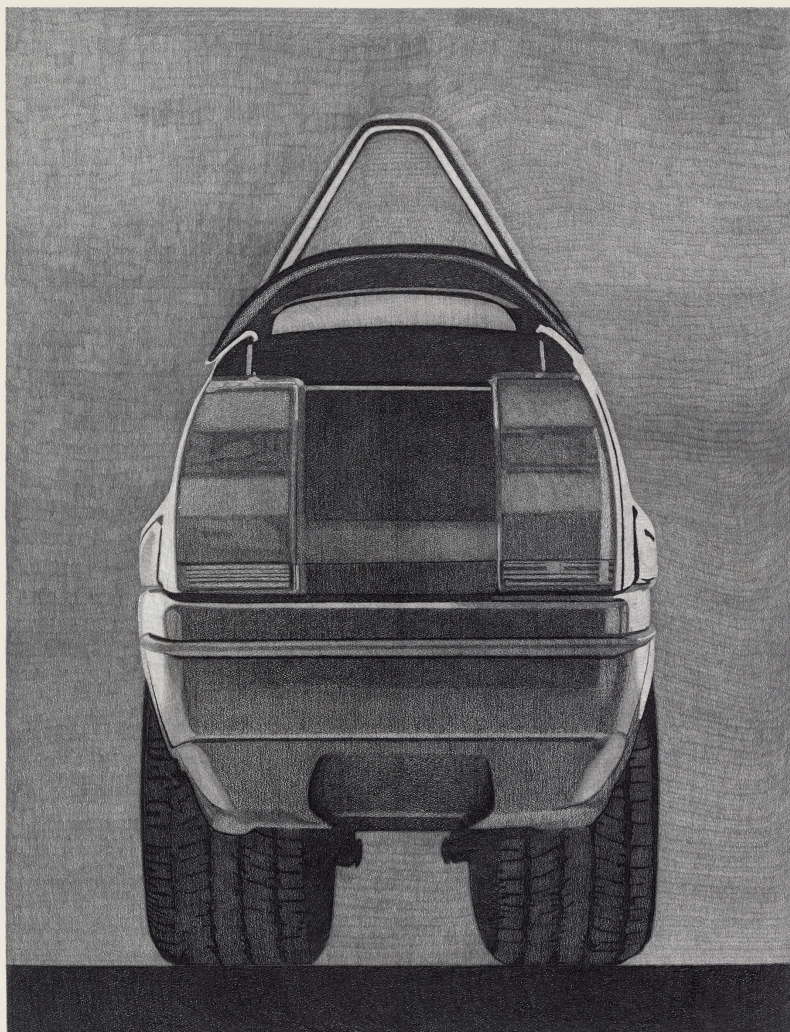
The Little Colonel, 1994
Oil on linen
67 x 51 ½ inches; 170 x 131 cm

Omega, 1994
Oil on linen
67 x 51 ½ inches; 170 x 131 cm



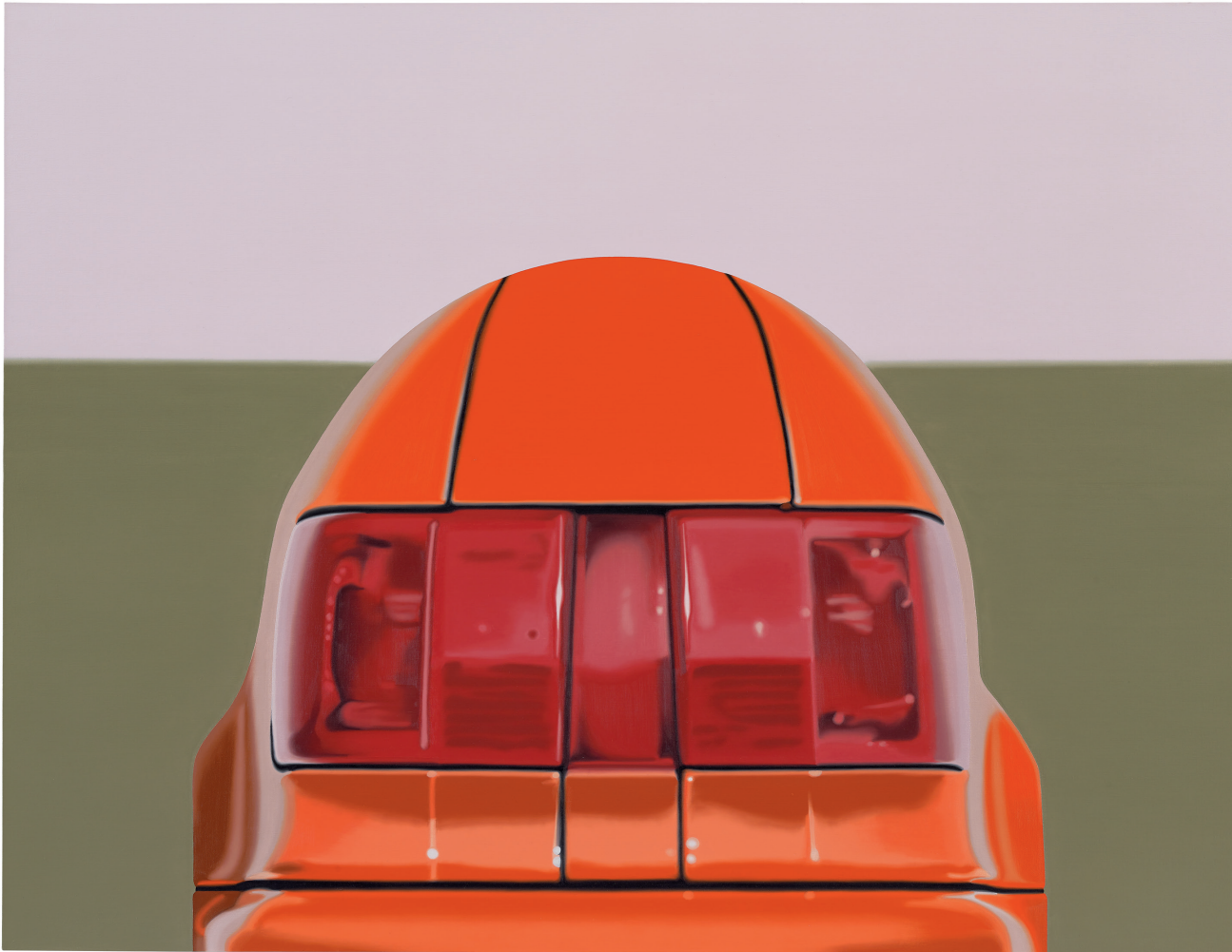


Omega, 1992
Graphite on paper
38 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; 99 x 73 cm

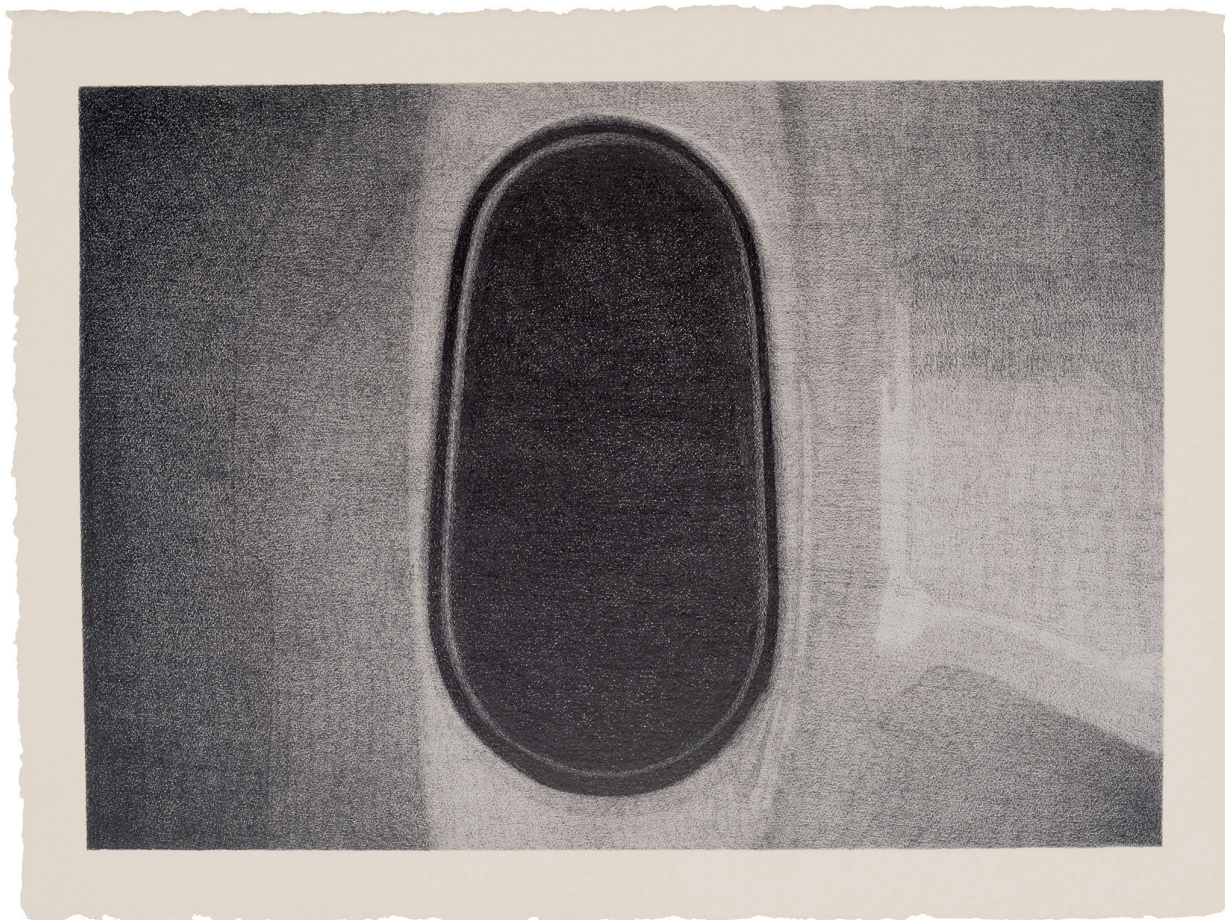


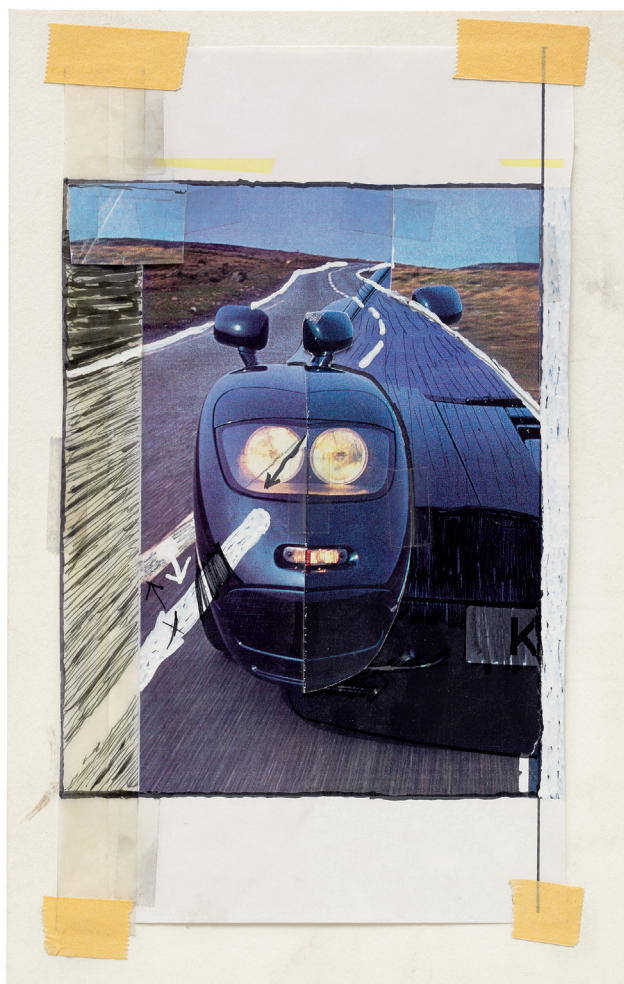
Omega, 1993
Graphite on paper
47 x 40 inches; 119 x 102 cm

Glider, 1995
Oil on linen
51 ½ x 67 inches; 131 x 170 cm

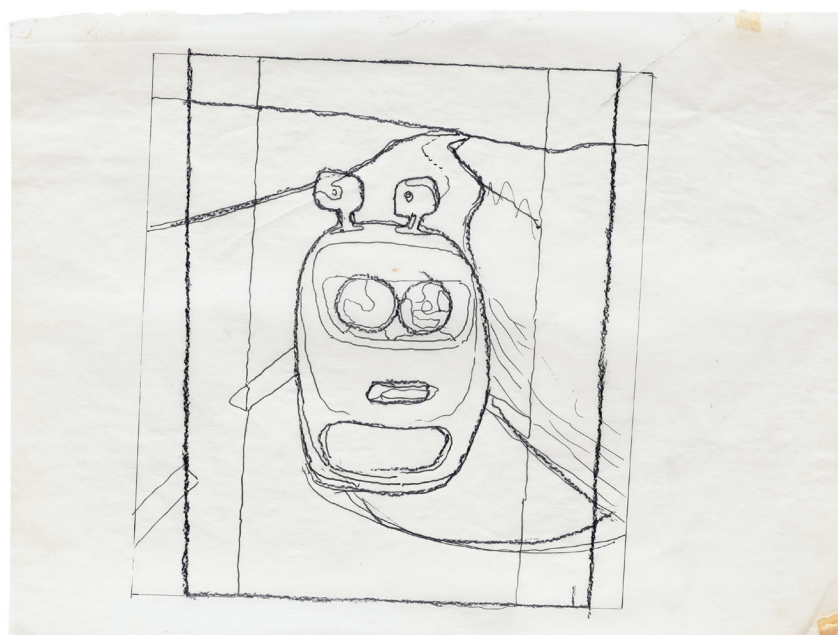


The Gift, 1993
Graphite on paper
22¾ x 30¾; 58 x 77 cm





Study for Vanishing Point, 1996
Collage
12 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches; 31 x 20 cm



Study for Vanishing Point, 1996
Graphite on vellum
9 x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches; 23 x 30 cm



Vanishing Point, 1996
Cibachrome print
14 x 11 inches; 36 x 28 cm



Peter Cain, 1996

The Body of C

Collier Schorr

A painting of a real thing. I assume some painters love the feeling of canvas and others want to remove it. Some cars, I think, are painted in a way to remove the sense of metal, hardness, and other cars are painted in a way to accentuate the fiberglass. The difference between shutting the door of a 1970s Barracuda and a BMW today. You can probably tell who was born in the 1960s by the way they slam a car door, used to the heaviness of steel, always surprised by the way new doors practically shut themselves.

I was born in the 1960s. We didn't have to wear seatbelts at first. The back seat of my mother's GTO was a giant maroon slippery vast vinyl canal. I have written about that car many times over the years. Everything about it was bigger faster heavier louder cooler than anyone else's mother's car in the entire state of New Jersey. Gas station attendants, who I didn't want to date but wanted to be, oohed and ahed over the car. It was the first car I felt was an extension of my body, because it was driven by a woman and it was envied by men. Cars generally didn't seem to be extensions of women, women seemed at that time to be decorations, living hood ornaments. The door of this car was gigantic. Like the hood of a normal car. So we were three, my mother and me and my brother in a big fast gas-guzzling period-colored GOAT.

That's part 1. Of course the car got sold, my parents got divorced, my mother went to social-work school and got a Toyota Corolla. I got my father's souped-up Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme. It had a modified 455-cubic-inch engine and racing mag wheels, and even though it had four doors and corduroy seats, it was a '79 Trans Am. I didn't test its speed, but when I went to college my brother did, and the car ended up in a lake. I did my own damage later, borrowing the Corolla when my mother was on vacation and making a left-hand turn from the right lane on Houston Street, crying over a breakup. It was raining, I was fucked. It was 1986. I didn't really drive again.

I remember Peter Cain's paintings. They fit and didn't fit with what I was looking at at the time. I thought about the Mel Ramos painting I would see passing by Louis K. Meisel Gallery. Never going in, we never went in. I was working for Peter Halley and Richard Prince at the same time that Peter Cain was obsessively painting cars. Peter Halley traded a painting to a collector for a Porsche. I gave Richard Prince a book my father wrote on the Buick GNX. Peter Halley made paintings in two parts with stripes, and Richard used house paint to make a giant color-field painting with a thinner painting hung below it.

Almost like two-door cars. Sporty painting. The way in which works work off each other is fascinating.

Richard told me about the writer Harry Crews and a book called *Car*. I wonder if Peter Cain read *Car*. He must have, or I hope he did, because I'm mentioning it here in hopes that someone will say, "Of course he read that. You aren't just coming up with some idea that is unrelated. This relates." So, in *Car* a guy who feels overpowered by power, underwhelmed by his own performance, sets out to eat a car. The story, as it turns out, somehow relates to Japan, because I could see this happening in Japan, only it would involve ropes. Anyway, to eat a car, if you really doubt this is possible, you have to cut it down. Into portions. Shrink it, deform it. To consume it you have to reinvent it. Change its body. Change the scale, like how a painting of a car no longer has the weight but maybe still has the impact.

My father, who is a renowned auto journalist, went to a book signing a few years ago, and a girl came up with the door of a Camaro for him to sign. I've been in a room where Channing Tatum signed a woman's breasts.

Until I saw the book *Peter Cain: The Los Angeles Pictures*, I had no idea that he looked like the kind of boys I liked in high school. The ones who didn't pump gas but wore Timberland ski hats and could have been mechanics except their hands and hair were cleaner and they actually went skiing. I like to imagine I almost looked like Peter, if I wasn't Jewish and was a guy. I read Jack Pierson's beautiful little essay in the book, and he notes how handsome Peter was. Its wistful, this noting. It's a privilege, you can tell, when one gay man notes the beauty of another. Sigh. He was both handsome and straight-looking. A kind of pinnacle. It counts in a different way. It's the gateway to everything. More than the handsome, though, is the boyish. Paint, boy, car. Luxury. There is a luxury to this. It's right that Jack, a photographer and a mortal, would note this. Just another separation between photographers and subjects and mortals and handsome men. This is a total aside, but I remember talking to Jack at a Mark Morrisroe opening a few years ago, standing in front of a nude self-portrait. I remarked to Jack, "That big dick must have come in handy, must have really helped him in his life," and Jack said, "Well, when he was tricking a john shot him, and afterwards he had a limp, so I guess it didn't help him in the end." It may have been the perfect story. The perfect Jack moment.

Peter Cain died in the age of people dying of AIDS, but he didn't die from it. I wonder how that serves his memorialization. Kind of interesting. He didn't die of AIDS, his work wasn't part of a group, it wasn't really gay-ish. In most reviews of my work there is some note to my identification. I find it tedious. So I thought about it when writing about Peter Cain. I didn't want to do the same thing. So that's about it. If I write about loving boys or the look of boys or the trophies of boys, it's about me as much as it is about him. So it's kind of a straight thing.

My brother slept in a fiberglass race-car bed until he was fourteen.

Muscle cars are American sculpture and painting and photography. I know I was startled and excited when I first saw Peter's work because it worshipped the only religion our family had, the steel garish show-off monsters my father would drive home every week. And suddenly what was half pride (how cool is that Indianapolis pace car parked in our driveway), half fear (why is everyone else driving a normal car that doesn't scream), was suddenly a masterpiece. A thing moved inside and hoisted up and gentled and softened and quiet. In the same

way one experienced one's body when standing next to a Robert Morris or a Richard Serra, I experienced my memory of form for the first time when seeing a car that was not a car.

There is a term: Car Guy. It's what people in the automotive business call the people, usually men, who were there for the Detroit heyday. The Big Three churning out these pure American dreams of power and freedom and expression. My dad is a true Car Guy. And they love those cars. You don't want to see pictures of most of them. They weren't drivers or teenagers, they were a kind of Mad Men, but the radicals. It's a particular time in American history when high performance, aggression, trippy details, stoned-looking mascots, speed freaks, all that stuff was under the control of big corporations that were reaching out to the new drivers who were getting drafted or protesting the war. My dad, who edited a magazine called *CARS*, would get letters from kids in Vietnam saying how they were saving their pay to buy a Corvette. Meanwhile in Astoria, Queens, a kid called Chas bought a '67 Corvette from the infamous Motion Performance hot-rod shop in Baldwin. He had an L88 engine dropped in and started to race it at drag strips. My dad, who wrote all the advertising copy for the shop, photographed that car a lot. It was a very fast car. Very. Eventually it broke the record, but that was after the kid, known as Astoria Chas, was killed in Vietnam. One day my dad showed me some of the pictures, because he realized that Chas, or Charlie as he was known off the track, was my type. I agreed. He was really my type, a beautiful guy with wavy brown hair and the confidence of a teen idol, or at least a guy who was very happy being a guy. But my Dad had only a few pictures of the boy. "I didn't care about the guys driving the cars," my dad said. "I just loved shooting the cars."



Sean, 1995
Graphite and charcoal on Arches paper
22½ x 30 inches; 57 x 76 cm

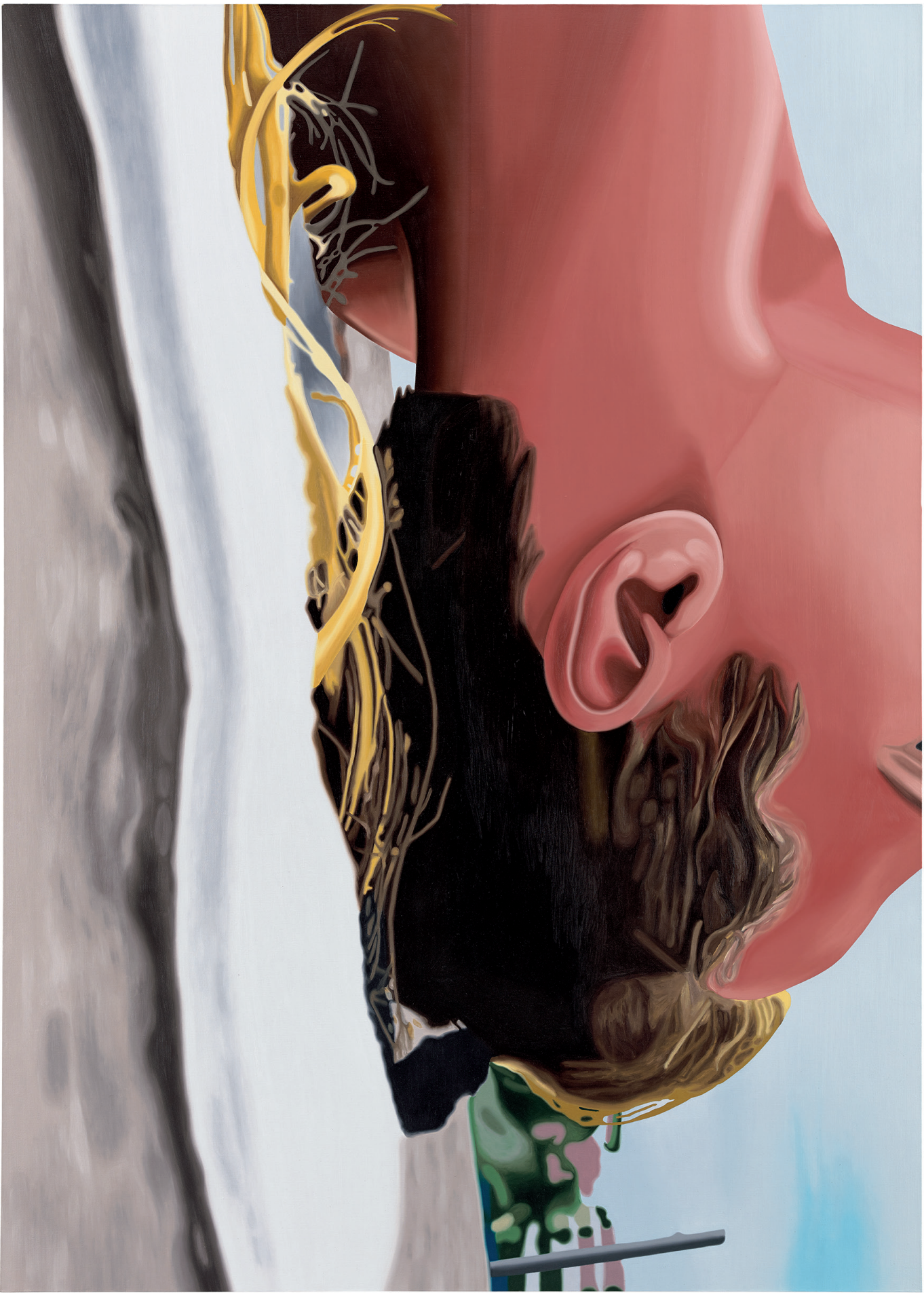


Untitled, 1995
Graphite and charcoal on Arches paper
22 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches; 58 x 77 cm

Sean, 1995
Graphite and charcoal on Rives BFK paper
22 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 30 inches; 58 x 76 cm



Sean Number One, 1996
Oil on linen
84 x 60 inches; 213 x 152 cm





Giant, 1995
Graphite and charcoal on Rives BFK paper
22 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 30 inches; 58 x 76 cm



Giant, 1995
Graphite and charcoal on Arches paper
22½ x 30 inches; 57 x 76 cm

Giant, 1995
Graphite on paper
22 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches; 58 x 77 cm

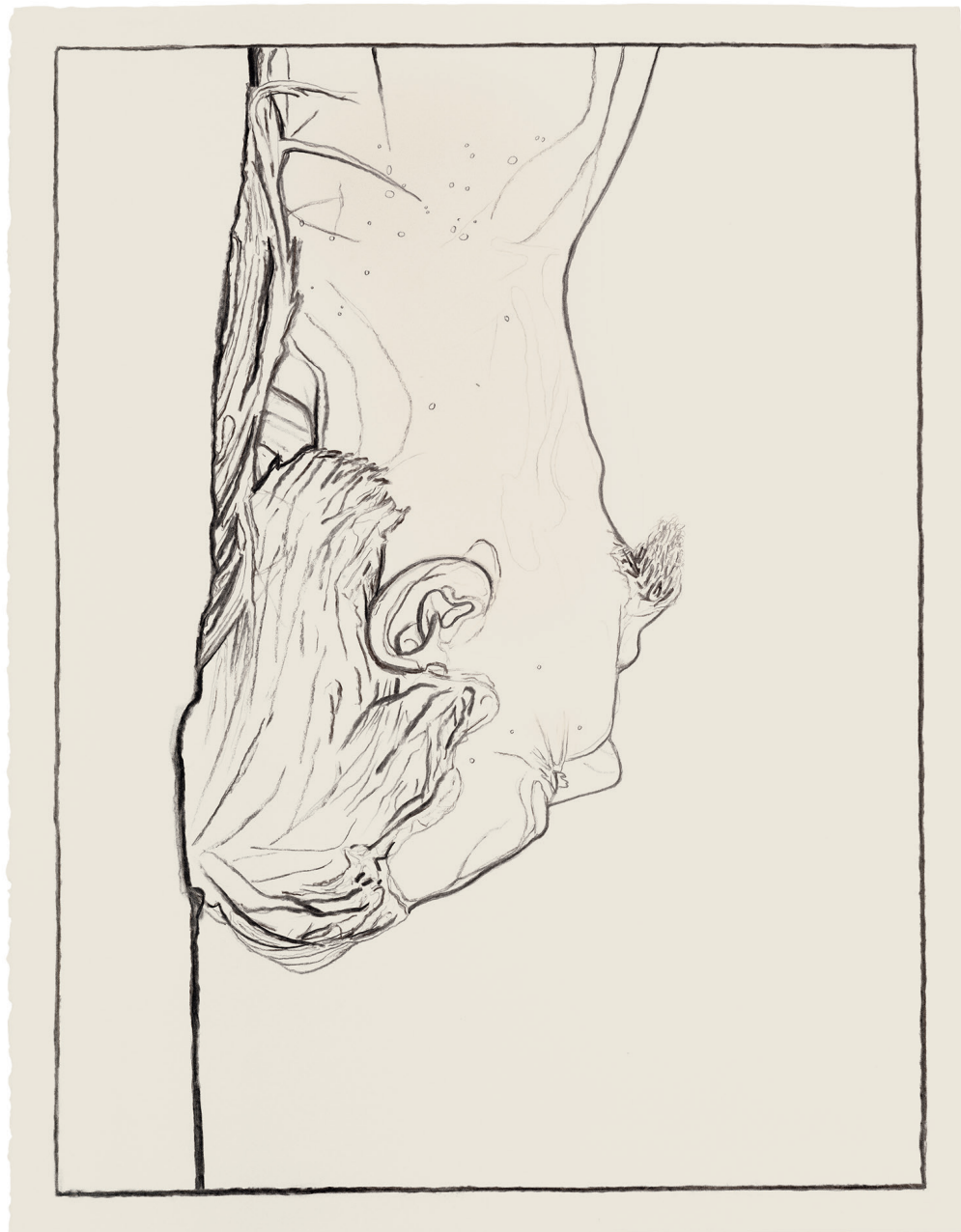


Sean Number Two, 1996
Oil on linen
60 x 84 inches; 152 x 213 cm



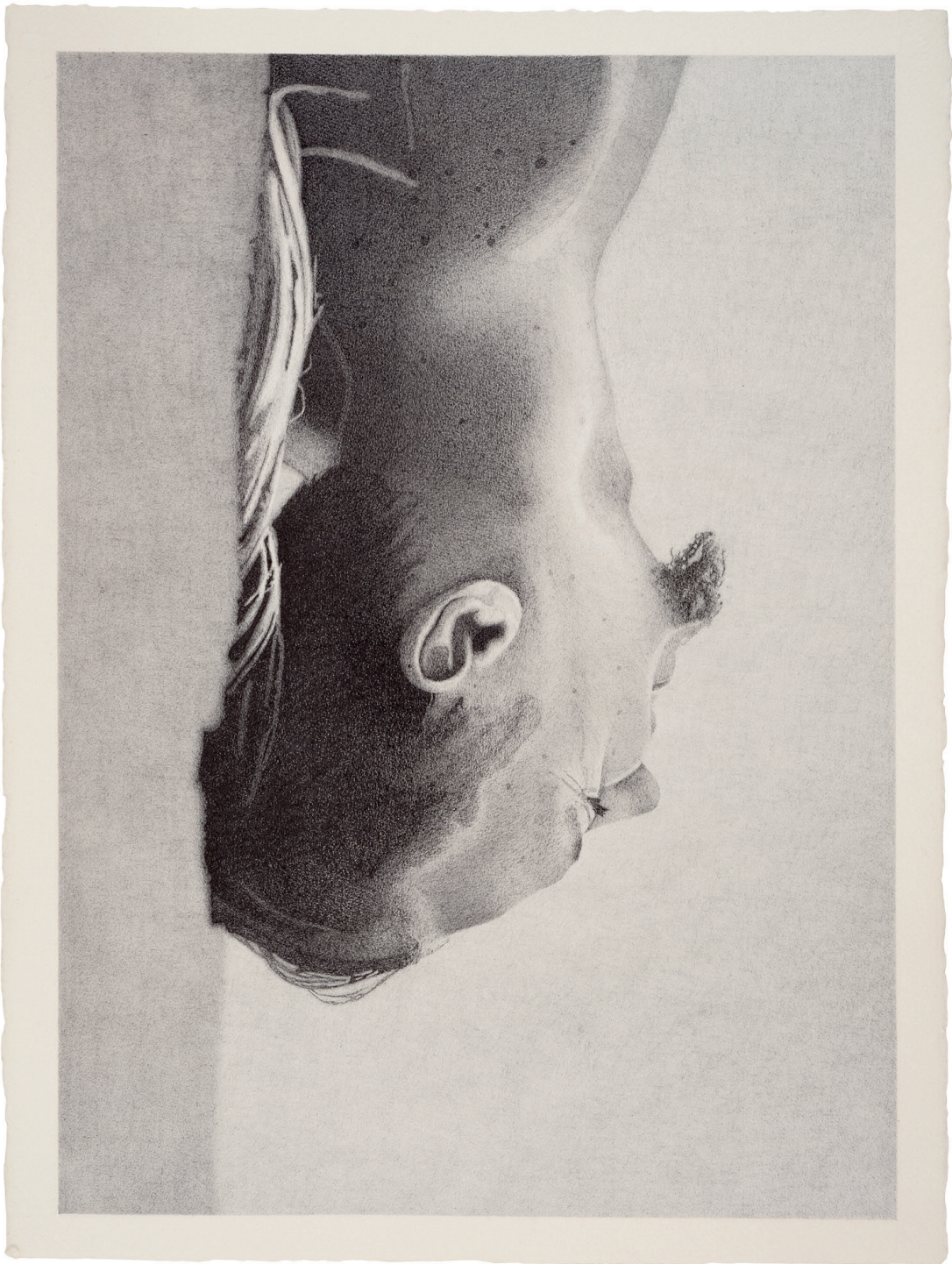


Los Angeles Loves Love, 1995
Graphite and charcoal on Rives BFK paper
30 x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches; 76 x 58 cm



Los Angeles Loves Love, 1995
Graphite and charcoal on paper
30 x 22½ inches; 76 x 57 cm

Los Angeles Loves Love, 1995
Graphite on Arches paper
30 x 22½ inches; 76 x 57 cm



Sean Number Three, 1996
Oil on linen
84 x 60 inches; 213 x 152 cm

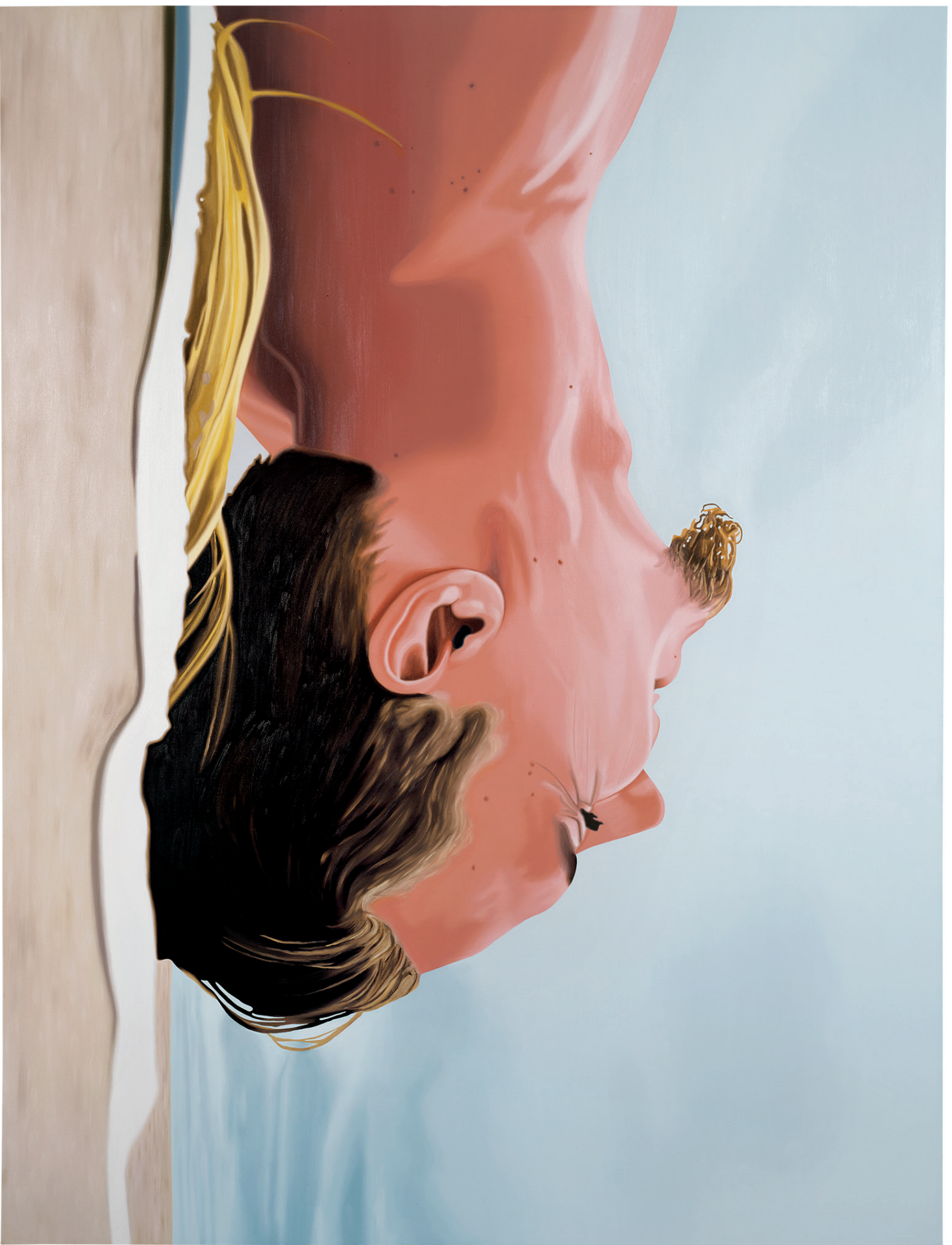




Fig. 20
Study for Sean Number Two, 1995
Acrylic on C-print mounted on board
13 x 12 inches; 33 x 31 cm

The Last of Peter Cain

Richard Meyer

Death necessarily bounds and defines an artist's career, retroactively designating the sum of all previous works as an oeuvre. Death removes an artist from the contemporary moment (in the most literal sense of contemporary as "living or occurring at the same time") and seals him or her within the historical past. Critics have understandably mourned the work that Peter Cain would have made if he had lived. And that mourning has been all the more acute because the last works he completed before his death marked a dramatic departure from everything that had come before. Before turning to those last works, let me explain that by "everything that had come before" I mean cars — or, to be more precise, paintings of cars. Cain's earliest pictures offer views of cars in their entirety, but he was best known for his subsequent paintings of automobiles compressed, elongated, fragmented, or otherwise dramatically reconfigured.

To make these paintings, Cain would start with a magazine ad, cut it up, and collage it back together, removing sections of an automobile (the back wheels, for example, or the entire passenger compartment) and refashioning the remains into a fantastical, if all but functionless, new model. For all the distortions he wrought on them, Cain's cars rarely seem as though they have been violently severed from a larger whole. Nor do they ever look dented, bruised, or demolished, in the manner of a John Chamberlain sculpture. Cain's recombinant machines appear instead as gleaming objects complete in themselves, newfangled automotive mutants or hybrids (if that term can be reclaimed from today's eco-friendly equivalent) beckoning our visual attention.

With *Pathfinder* (1993) [p. 69] Cain offers, in side view, the radically reconceived body of a Nissan SUV. Rather than resting on four wheels, the vehicle now stands, impressively if improbably, on one. Fittingly, this wheel is its spare tire — the one generally not in use (and therefore attached to the tailgate). The artist Jack Pierson once characterized Cain's pictures as "contemporary cars Frankenstein-ed into Cyclops in a highly skilled, photorealistic manner."¹ I like this description and would add to it only that, in contrast to Frankenstein, the stitches of Cain's beautiful monsters never show. The surgery has happened, as it were, out of frame, in the preliminary collages, sketches, and detailed drawings through which Cain plotted and perfected his compositions [fig. 21]. The surgery also happened, of course, in the artist's mind. A friend of his told me that he did as much planning as painting, which is to say that the paintings were as much a matter of Cain's imagination as of his technical process.

The artist's peak moment of public visibility came with his inclusion in the 1993 Whitney Biennial [fig. 22]. His "roommate" in the exhibition was Charles Ray, as represented by *Family Romance* (1993), a painted fiberglass sculpture in which a father, mother, little boy, and infant girl have been rendered, with anatomic exactitude, in the nude — exact, that is, save for the astonishing fact of their identical height: the parents have been shrunk and the infant expanded such that the whole family now matches the height of the little boy, the only figure who retains a realistic size for his age. As more than one critic suggested at the time, Ray's uncomfortably exposed and impossibly equalized family would have been the perfect inhabitants for Cain's mutant and compacted automobiles.

The Whitney's 1993 exhibition was widely discussed by critics at the time, and almost as widely attacked, as the "identity politics" or "PC" Biennial. The show included more women, people of color, and queer artists than any in the museum's history. But it was not simply the newfound visibility of underrepresented communities that provoked controversy — and, in many cases, consternation. It was the fact that so much of the work on display confronted issues of race, gender, and sexuality, including the urgency of the AIDS crisis and the institutional racism of museums. Perhaps the signature piece was Daniel J. Martinez's reworking of the Whitney's admission tags, worn by every visitor upon entry. For the duration of the biennial, the tags were imprinted with all or part of the sentence "I CAN'T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE."

I was working at the Whitney in 1993 as a tour guide so as to supplement my (shall we say) modest income as a graduate student while writing an art-history dissertation. I remember thinking of the gallery shared by Ray and Cain as a kind of straight-boy ghetto, assuming, erroneously as it turned out, that any painter so fixated on automobiles must have been heterosexual, and normatively so at that. Not unrelatedly, perhaps, I typically skipped over Cain's paintings when I led tours of the exhibition. I had never been into cars.

What I failed to recognize at the time was the value of Cain's refusal of political correctness in favor of a commitment to the medium and history of painting. His paintings remember and rework the legacies of Photorealism, Color Field painting, Pop, Finish Fetish, and Surrealism. If that struck me as aesthetically retrograde (or, perhaps worse, masculinist) in the 1990s, it now seems audacious. At the height of identity politics, Cain had no interest in making art about identity or revealing himself in any transparent or confessional manner. This hardly meant, however, that his identity was not marked by difference.

It was not until I was invited to write this essay that I learned about Cain's life as an emerging artist in New York City during the 1990s — that, for example, he circulated within a downtown, largely queer art scene alongside friends and fellow artists such as Pierson, David Armstrong, and Nan Goldin. That, for a time, he dated an East Village drag queen and makeup artist named Misdemeanor (Misty, for short). That he enjoyed the occasional Joan Crawford movie no less than his monthly *Car and Driver* magazine. That he was all-American in looks yet shy, even socially awkward. That he identified above all as a painter yet refused to talk about his paintings.

After completing fifty-six paintings across eight years, Cain turned away from the subject matter of cars, focusing instead on the urban landscape of Los Angeles,



Fig. 21
Study for Pathfinder, 1992
Collage
8 7/8 x 8 1/2 inches; 23 x 22 cm

Fig. 22
View of the 1993 Whitney Biennial.
From left: Charles Ray, *Family Romance*, 1993. Peter Cain, *EB 110*, 1993 [p. 73]. Peter Cain, *Pathfinder*, 1993 [p. 69]



a landscape that is, of course, inextricable from cars [pp. 136–49]. As with his pictures of driverless automobiles, however, Cain’s paintings of Los Angeles gas stations and mini-malls are swept clean of people, not to mention cars (save for reflections in plate-glass windows). They likewise erase all text and logos from the ubiquitous commercial signage, presenting Los Angeles as an empty wonderland of geometry and color.

In the midst of working on the Los Angeles landscapes, Cain initiated a new series of paintings. They marked the entrance, monumentally, of the human figure into his pictorial world — or rather, of one figure in particular: his boyfriend Sean. There are only three paintings in the series — *Sean Number One*, *Sean Number Two*, and *Sean Number Three* (all 1996) — and no indication that the artist intended more. All three derive from a series of photographs Cain took on a beach in Fort Lauderdale in 1994 [fig. 20]. He shot them from a position directly adjacent to Sean — which is to say, lying on a neighboring towel on the sand.

In two of the paintings (*Sean Number One* and *Sean Number Three*) Cain rotates our perspective ninety degrees clockwise, shifting the orientation of his boyfriend’s prone body from horizontal to vertical [fig. 23]. This reorientation of the larger-than-life-size figure is reminiscent of the upending of the SUV in *Pathfinder*, though without the “Frankenstein-ed” mutations of form. In *Sean Number One* we are positioned so close to the figure that we see only the side of his head (with the face cropped out) and neck, along with some sand, sky, foliage, a telephone pole, and a bit of loosely painted architecture. *Sean Number Three* pulls back somewhat to encompass a profile of Sean’s entire head as well as his shoulders and (arguably) a bit of chest. The painting’s background, almost entirely taken up by sky, suggests that our view of the scene has slid to the left, away from the distant foliage in *Sean Number One*.

Sean Number Two, the painting on which I will focus in closest detail, changes our view yet again, sliding back to the right such that we see a great deal more

foliage but no architecture or telephone poles. Rather than framing Sean in strict profile, Cain captures him at an oblique angle, from below and behind. Sean lifts his head off the towel, perhaps to look at the water, and we see his shoulders, neck, upper back, most of his head, and a fractional view of his nose, forehead, and left eye. But what we see most spectacularly is his sun-bleached ponytail, which becomes, in Cain's hands, a lovely cascade of intertwined strands of pigment. The near vertical of the ponytail divides the composition into two uneven sections: a larger "Sean zone" to the left and a smaller "nature zone" to the right.

The upward tilt of Sean's head allows the ponytail to unfurl in all its visual splendor. In the other two paintings, by contrast, the bleached-blond strands are confined to a slender column of space between the towel and the body, and the ponytail, like the man to whom it belongs, seems to be in repose. In *Sean Number Two*, however, the ponytail has been raised and repositioned to suggest motion, the pull of gravity, a spiraling downward toward the sand. Paradoxically, the longer one looks at Sean's ponytail, the less hairlike (or unambiguously hairlike) it appears. The interwoven brown and yellow filaments of paint seem as much like stalks of straw or spirals of pasta as they do strands of hair. But neither straw nor pasta nor hair is quite right, because none of these references capture the particular texture and intricate overlays of color and line that constitute this passage of the painting. As I struggled with this instability, I began to focus on something I had not noticed before: the slivers of sky and pocket of sand that peek through the brown and yellow strands. When viewed at close range, these tiny apertures not only contribute to the formal fascination of the ponytail but also remind us that we are seeing an arrangement of painted shapes and colors on canvas before we are seeing sky or sand or hair. What we are seeing, in other words, is the play of abstraction.

Cain's tendency toward abstraction surfaces even more strongly in his treatment of the birthmarks strewn across the expanse of Sean's shoulders. Although these marks are of varying circumference, they all share the same matte-brown flatness. As we move closer to the painting's surface, they come to seem less epidermal than optical, less a matter of sun-damaged skin than of oil paint and geometry.

I remained confused by Cain's treatment of the birthmarks until I compared *Sean Number Two* with the source photograph on which it is based. Each brown spot in the painting corresponds to a specific mark on Sean's body, but Cain has darkened its brownness and buffed away the patchy inconsistencies of texture and color. The small disks of unmodulated brown paint appear against the pink ground of Sean's skin like dots to be connected or points of a constellation to be traced. Visible yet seemingly insignificant in the photograph, these birthmarks become epic in the painting. They pull away from physiognomic believability to become an abstract, nearly astral pattern in their own right.

Cain reportedly did not like being called a Photorealist, and with good reason. Upon viewing a painting like *Sean Number Two* firsthand, it becomes clear how much it departs from the reality effects of photography. I agree with the critic Jerry Saltz, who wrote, "Cain's great accomplishment is that although all of his paintings derive from photographs, none of them picture the world as if seen through a lens."³



Fig. 23
Sean Number Three in Peter Cain's 13th Street studio, 1996

I have suggested some of the ways in which *Sean Number Two* departs from “the world as if seen through a lens” even as it relies upon and reimagines its photographic source image. In researching the Sean series, I encountered multiple photographs of Sean from that day at the beach. As I looked at them, I thought of Cain with his (pre-cell-phone) camera, lying beside his boyfriend and catching him, perhaps unawares, in the midst of a shared day of sunning and swimming. Did Cain know at the time that he would use the photographs as source material for a new series of paintings? Or was he simply taking some snapshots, for his own pleasure, of Sean? Were the photographs a byproduct of a day spent at the beach, or was the day planned around the production of the pictures? My intuition tells me it was the former, that it was just a day at the beach, and that, in looking at the photographs at some later point, Cain recognized the creative and compositional possibilities they afforded.

The Sean paintings were not the last works Cain completed. After *Sean Number Three* he finished several Los Angeles paintings, and he was working on at least one more at the time of his death. If the Sean series has nevertheless come to represent the terminus of his work and life, it is in part because *Sean Number Two* appeared on the poster for an exhibition that opened at Matthew Marks Gallery shortly after the artist’s death [fig. 24]. The show had been in the works for almost a year, and, devastated by the loss of his friend, Marks considered canceling it. After speaking with Cain’s friends and fellow artists, however, he decided to proceed with the exhibition, and the poster went out as planned. The show was called “Peter Cain: New Paintings and Drawings,” a title that must have acquired a poignant, if not unbearably sad, meaning for Cain’s friends and loved ones. After this exhibition, there would never be any more “new work” to show. These paintings and drawings, including the Sean series, will always be his last.

Fig. 24
Exhibition poster for “Peter Cain: New
Paintings and Drawings” at Matthew
Marks Gallery, New York, 1997



Writing in *The Village Voice*, Peter Schjeldahl opened his review of the show in a highly unusual fashion:

“New York artworldlings ploughing through our daily curse of not-invariably-100-percent-useless art mail last month unfolded copies of a modestly sized poster and instantly reacted in ways that caused anyone who was in the room with us to stare quizzically. My wife heard me laugh from sheer startlement. Then she saw the poster and was wowed, too. Many exhibition announcements are intended to do this, and maybe two or three a decade do it: go off in one’s hands like letter bombs of unique, original beauty. It was — and is, and will be, as already a classic — the painter Peter Cain’s announcement for his present, posthumous show.”³

Schjeldahl slides in and out of different temporalities and tenses (“It was — and is, and will be,” “his present, posthumous show”) as though the critic were still adjusting both to the fact of the artist’s death and to the startling effect of the Sean series in comparison to the works that preceded it. His word choice (“artworldlings,” “startlement,” “letter bombs of unique, original beauty”) seems equally off-kilter. No less unusual than Schjeldahl’s prose, however, is his decision to focus on the poster in such detail. A work illustrated in an exhibition announcement, whether as a postcard, poster, or magazine ad, is meant to pique the recipient’s interest in seeing (and, ideally, purchasing) the original. Here, however, Schjeldahl reviews the poster rather than the painting itself. And he gives the poster a rave.

Late in the process of writing this essay, I asked the Matthew Marks Gallery for a copy of the 1997 poster. I made this request (which was duly fulfilled by the gallery) under the guise of research. In truth, I could have completed my essay without it. But I asked for the poster because I wanted to have it on my wall — to share in the beauty of Sean and in the memory of Peter.

Although we never met, Cain and I grew up in the same town: Livingston, New Jersey. Though only forty-five minutes from New York City, the middle-class suburb always seemed to me the very antithesis of Manhattan cosmopolitanism. Livingston was the province of the mall rather than the museum, the roller rink rather than Studio 54. As a boy, I never imagined that an artist (or, for that matter, an art historian) could emerge from such a town.

Rather than searching for the young Peter Cain in Livingston, I returned to that day on the beach in Fort Lauderdale. I asked the gallery whether there were additional photographs, and they e-mailed me two pictures printed after Cain’s death from negatives found in his studio. In one, we see the sleepy-eyed artist in a pink T-shirt and blue cut-off shorts [fig. 25]. He looks up at the camera, which must have been held by Sean standing above him. Peter lies vertically across a white towel set out horizontally. His legs extend off the towel; patches of sand cling to his upper thigh and calf. A pair of blue Birkenstocks, presumably his own, sit next to the towel.

Consider, as an extended caption to this picture, the following recollection of the artist by Jack Pierson:

“Peter was very boy. He smoked Marlboros, didn’t make his bed, only wore Wranglers or Levis cords with a Fruit of the Loom pocket T-shirt

Fig. 25
Peter Cain in Fort Lauderdale, c.1994. Photo by Sean LeClair





Fig. 26
Sean LeClair in Fort Lauderdale, c.1994. Photo by Peter Cain

and a ski hat. He was a spoiled brat because anybody would do anything for him, and he basically did whatever he wanted, which was not much, besides paint and listen to music. Did I mention he was gorgeous? Pretty, like an angel that you just wanted to slap. So of course he got away with murder.”⁴

As Pierson remembers him, Cain was part slacker, part bad boy, and altogether irresistible. Looking at the snapshot of Peter drowsy (or maybe high?) on the beach, I know that I too would have let him do whatever he wanted.

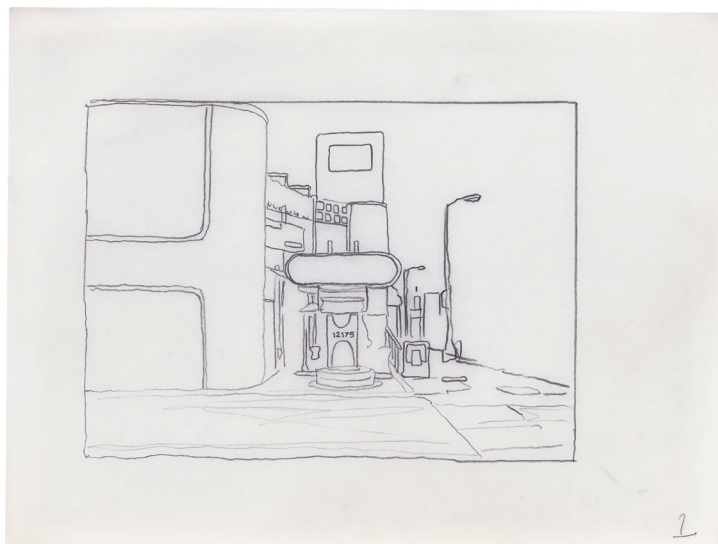
The second photograph printed after Cain’s death shows Sean lying on his towel [fig. 26]. It is a variant of the source photographs for the paintings except for one startling thing: Sean turns to look directly at the camera, and he smiles. Given the restricted view of his face afforded by the paintings, I was startled by the immediacy of his smile, by his lifted hand holding a lit cigarette, by the casual pleasure of his expression, by the particularity of him.

Would we know that Sean was the artist’s boyfriend were it not mentioned in almost every description of the paintings (including mine)?⁵ Rather than offering the sense of affectionate contact and pleasurable connection suggested by the snapshots of Sean and Peter on the beach, the paintings suspend Sean between intimacy and abstraction, between extreme closeness and partial inaccessibility. Cain’s paintings of Sean as a scruffy Gulliver on the beach are what he bequeathed to history. Although the posthumously printed snapshot provides access to Sean’s smiling face, that smile was not meant for us.

I go to the Matthew Marks Gallery to look at *Sean Number Two* on display in the gallery’s recent Cain exhibition. The picture has, rightly, been given a long wall to itself. Sunlight pours in from the skylights above. I think of Peter and Sean on the beach and the distance separating that day in southeast Florida from this one in west Chelsea, the distance between a private snapshot and a public painting, between the self you show the world and the self you share only with your boyfriend. I move closer to the painting, as close as I can get without alarming the gallery staff. I take in once more Cain’s treatment of the ponytail and birthmarks, of skin and sand and sky. I back away from the painting and leave the gallery. I have just had an intimate experience with the picture. It has conjured for me a vivid memory of the artist, a memory of Sean and Peter, a memory of a day I never had. I call my boyfriend back in Los Angeles and tell him I miss him.

NOTES

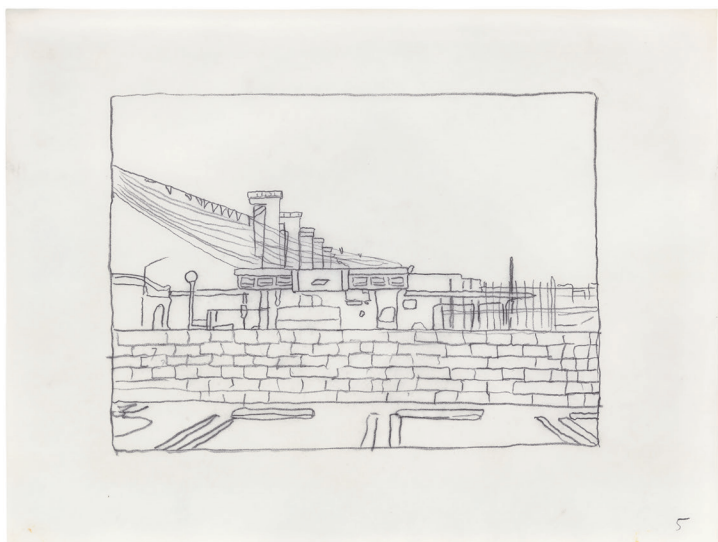
1. Jack Pierson, “Peter Cain,” in *Peter Cain: The Los Angeles Pictures* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery; Cologne: Galerie Aurel Scheibler, 2005), p. 3.
2. Jerry Saltz, “Carpe Diem,” *The Village Voice*, October 23, 2002, p. 67.
3. Peter Schjeldahl, “Hail and Farewell,” *The Village Voice*, February 25, 1997.
4. Jack Pierson, op. cit.
5. Sean’s status as Cain’s boyfriend was freely acknowledged by virtually every critic who wrote on the paintings in 1997 save for, peculiarly enough, Roberta Smith in *The New York Times*, who referred to their subject as simply “a man named Sean.” See Roberta Smith, “A New Surge of Growth, Just as Death Cut it Off,” *The New York Times*, February 14, 1997, C 33.



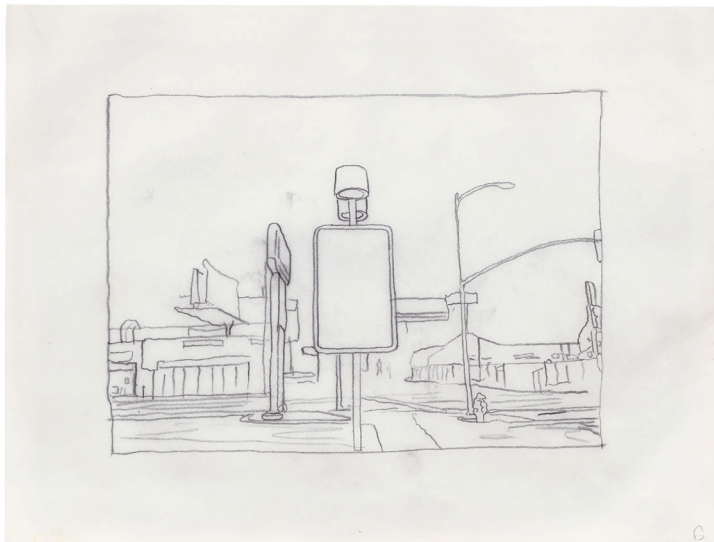
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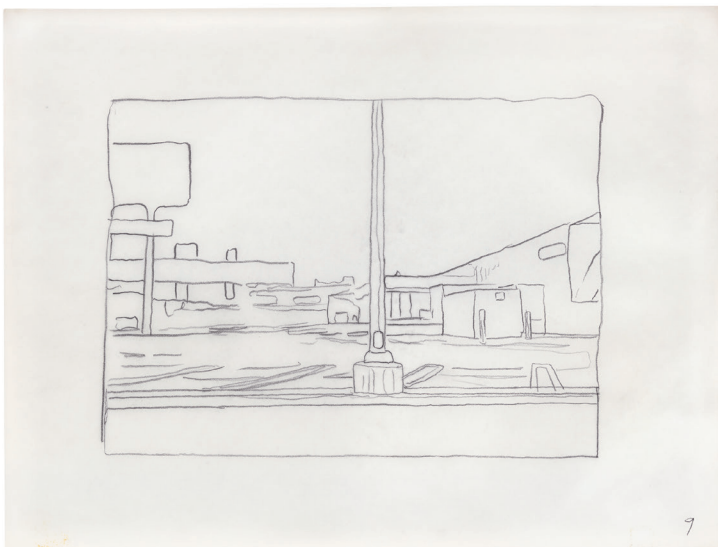
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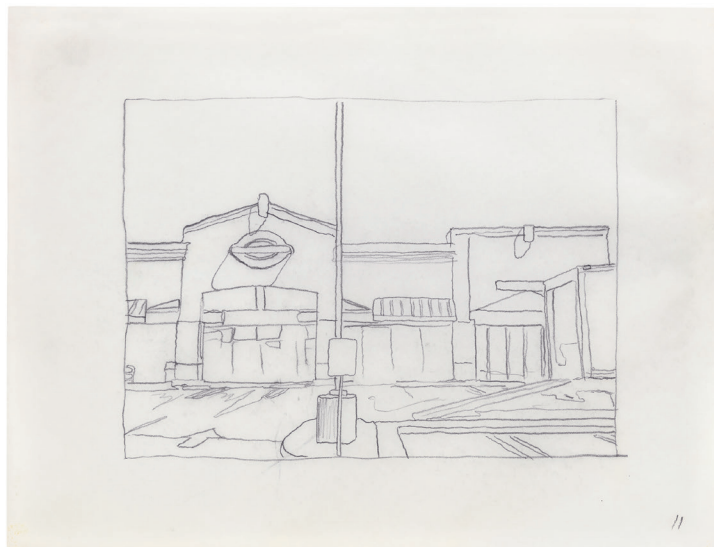
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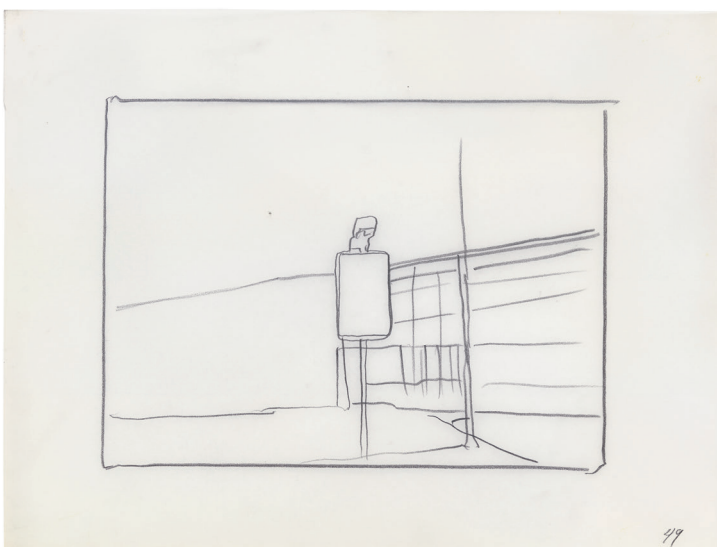
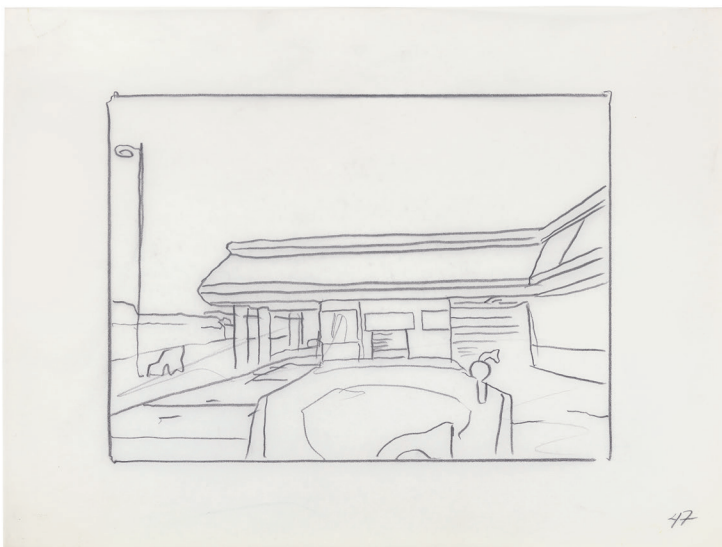
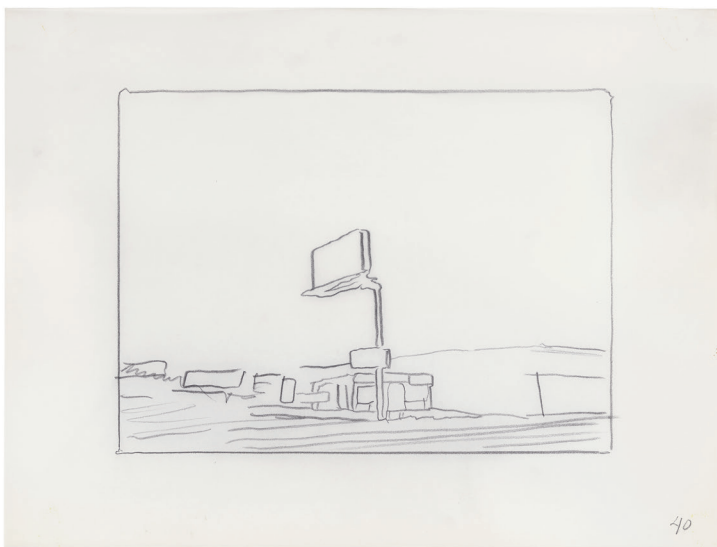
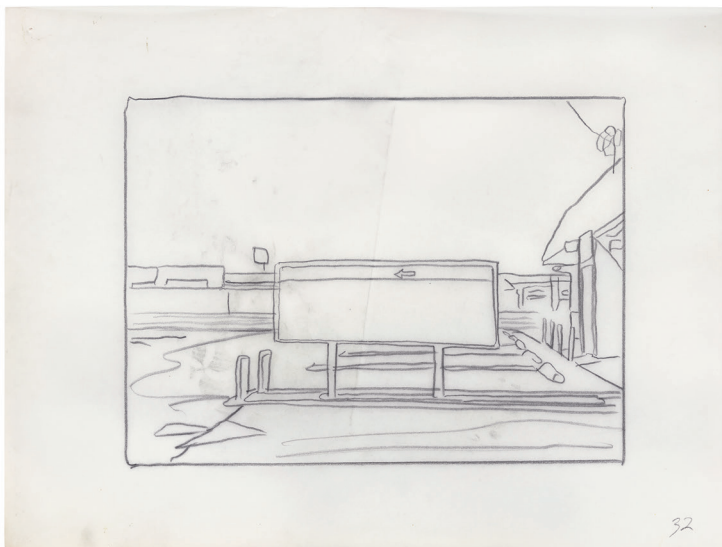
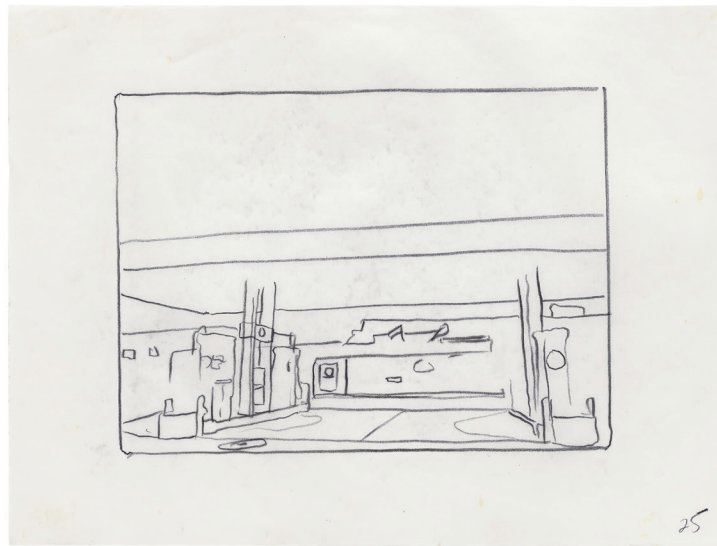
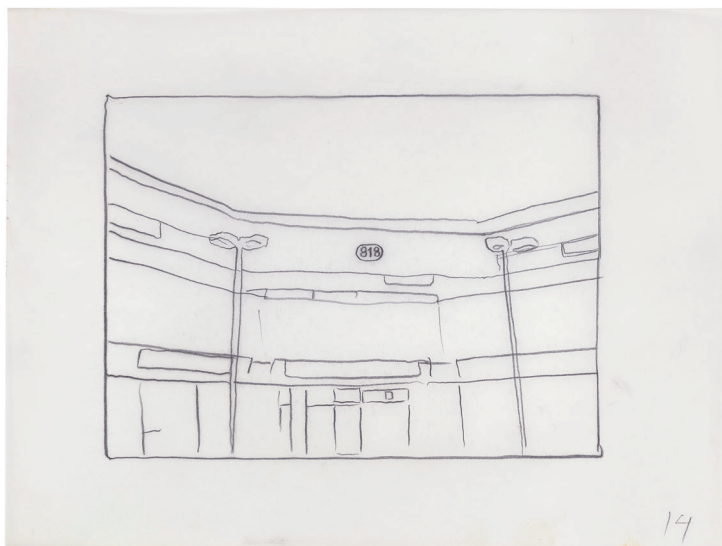


7



11

Untitled (1), 1996. Untitled (3), 1996
 Untitled (5), 1996. Untitled (6), 1996
 Untitled (9), 1996. Untitled (11), 1996



Untitled (14), 1996. Untitled (25), 1996
Untitled (32), 1996. Untitled (40), 1996
Untitled (47), 1996. Untitled (49), 1996

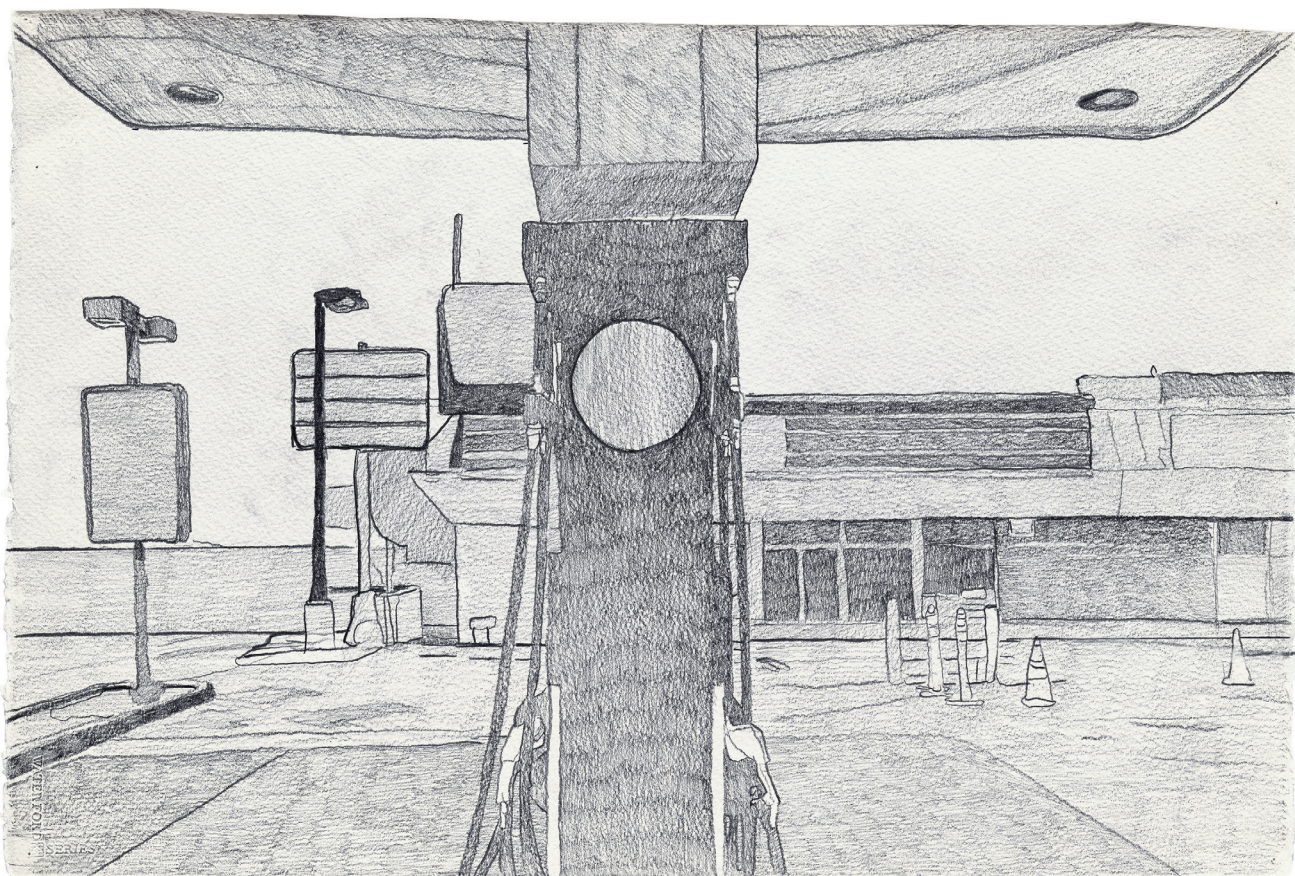
All drawings: Graphite on vellum. 9 x 12 inches; 23 x 31 cm

Untitled Number Three, 1996
Oil on linen
37 x 57 inches; 94 x 145 cm



Untitled Number Four, 1996
Oil on linen
42 x 60 inches; 107 x 152 cm





Study for Mobil, 1996
Graphite on Saunders Waterford Series paper
14 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches; 38 x 57 cm

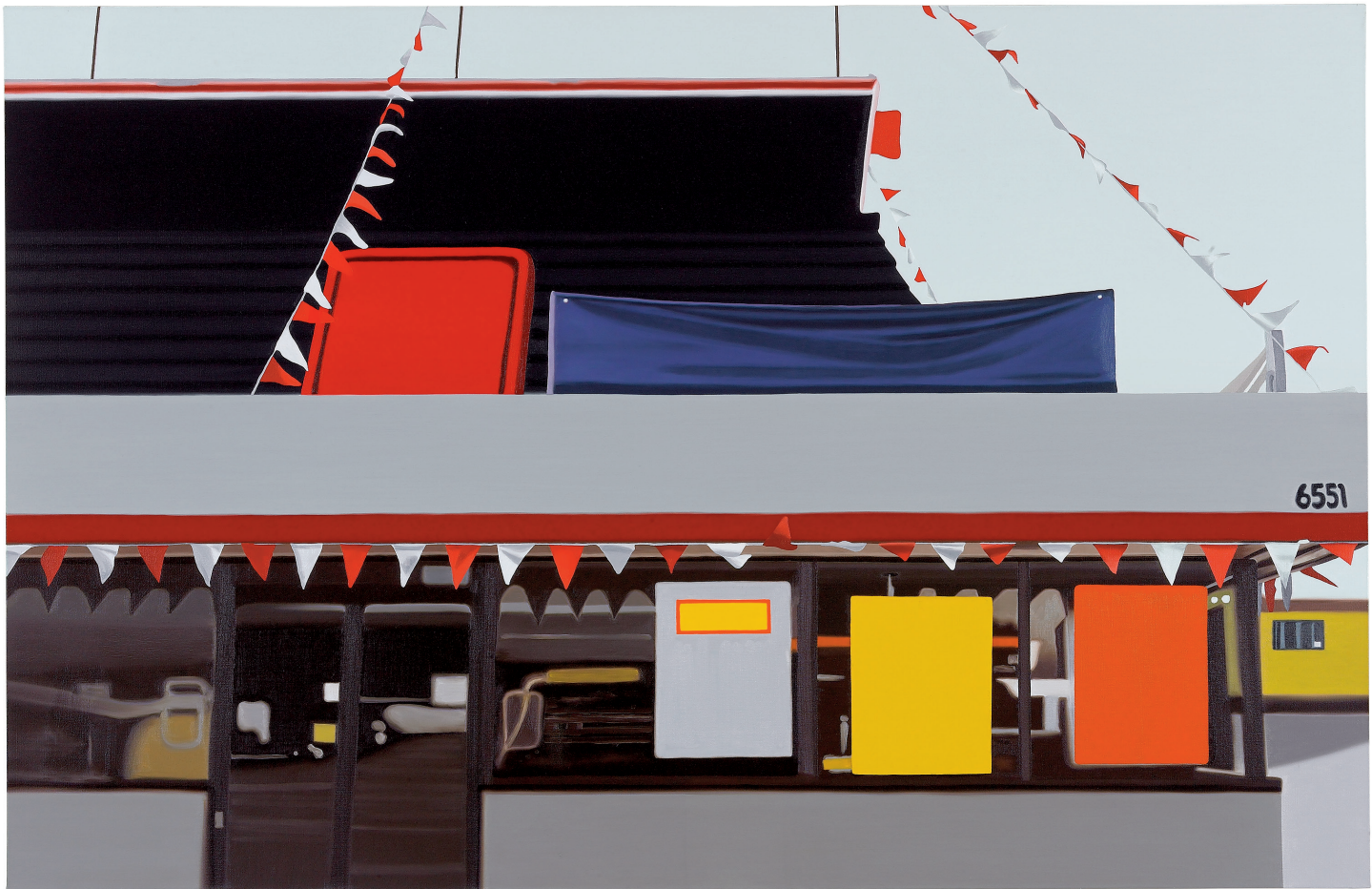


Study for Glendale Boulevard, 1996
Graphite on vellum
8¼ x 12 inches; 21 x 31 cm

Untitled Number Five, 1996
Oil on linen
49½ x 60 inches; 126 x 152 cm



Glendale Boulevard, 1996
Oil on linen
37 x 57 inches; 94 x 145 cm



Mobil, 1996
Oil on linen
37 x 57 inches; 94 x 145 cm





"Peter Cain" at Simon Watson, New York, 1991.
 From left: *Single Wheel Miata*, 1990. *Carrera 911 Turbo #1*, 1991 [p. 61]. Below: "Peter Cain: Paintings & Drawings" at Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Santa Monica, California, 1990. From left: *Prelude #3*, 1990 [p. 57]. *Carrera #1*, 1990. *Prelude #1*, 1990 [p. 59]



Peter Cain

Born: Orange, NJ, 1959

Died: New York, 1997

Education

1977–1980

Parsons School of Design, New York

1980–1982

School of Visual Arts, New York

One-Person Exhibitions

1989

“Paintings and Drawings,” Pat Hearn Gallery, New York

1990

Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Santa Monica, CA

1991

Simon Watson, New York

1992

Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

1995

“Recent Paintings,” Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco

“Paintings, Drawings, Photographs,” Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

1997

“New Paintings and Drawings,” Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

2002

“More Courage and Less Oil,” Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

2005

“The Sean Pictures,” Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

“The Los Angeles Pictures,” Galerie Aurel Scheibler, Cologne

2016

Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Selected Group Exhibitions

1990

“The Clinic,” Simon Watson, New York

“Pop 90,” Postmasters, New York

“The Children’s AIDS Project, A Benefit Exhibition,” Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Santa Monica, CA

“Vertigo,” Galerie Thaddeaus Ropac, Paris

1991

“Something Pithier and More Psychological,” Simon Watson, New York

“Someone or Somebody,” Meyers/Bloom Gallery, Los Angeles

“Paintings and Drawings,” Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Santa Monica, CA

“Vertigo: The Remake,” Galerie Thaddeaus Ropac, Salzburg



"Peter Cain: Paintings, Drawings, Photographs" at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 1995. From left: *Omega*, 1994 [p. 97]. *The Gift*, 1993 [p. 103]. *Saturday Disaster*, 1993. *Saturday Disaster*, 1993 [p. 93]. Above: "Peter Cain: Recent Paintings" at Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco, 1995. From left: *Toronado*, 1994 [p. 87]. *Charger*, 1992–94 [p. 85]. *Thunderbird*, 1994 [p. 83]

"Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?," The Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, NY
"(Dis)member," Simon Watson, New York
"We've lost E.T. but the boy's coming back: Peter Cain, Michael Jenkins, Michael Landy," Karsten Schubert, London
"Act-Up, The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power: Benefit Exhibition," Matthew Marks Gallery and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

1992

"5th Anniversary Show," Karsten Schubert, London
"Psycho," Kunsthall, New York
"Nayland Blake, Richmond Burton, Peter Cain, and Gary Hume," Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

1993

"Pittsburgh Collects," Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh
Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
"Slittamenti," Antichi Granat Alla Giudecca, Venice (45th Venice Biennale)
"Drawing the Line Against AIDS," Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice (45th Venice Biennale)
Biennial Exhibition, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul
"A Series of Anniversary Exhibitions: Part III," Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
"Art, Money & Myth," Palm Beach Community College Museum of Art, Lake Worth, FL
"Everyday Life," Kim Light Gallery, Los Angeles
"The Return of the Cadavre Exquis," The Drawing Center, New York; traveled to Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Santa Monica Museum of Art, CA; Forum for Contemporary Art, Saint Louis; American Center, Paris

1994

"Desire" (Visionaire/DIFFA Benefit Exhibition), Charles Cowles Gallery, New York
"The Institute of Cultural Anxiety: Works from the Collection," Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

1995

Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
"Richard Artschwager, Peter Cain, Vija Celmins, Chuck Close, Joseph Cornell, Robert Gober, George Stoll, Steve Wolf," Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco
"Summer Group Exhibition: Richmond Burton, Peter Cain, John Chamberlain, Andreas Gursky, Roni Horn, Gary Hume, Andy Warhol," Matthew Marks Gallery, New York
"25 Americans: Painting in the 90s," Milwaukee Art Museum

1996

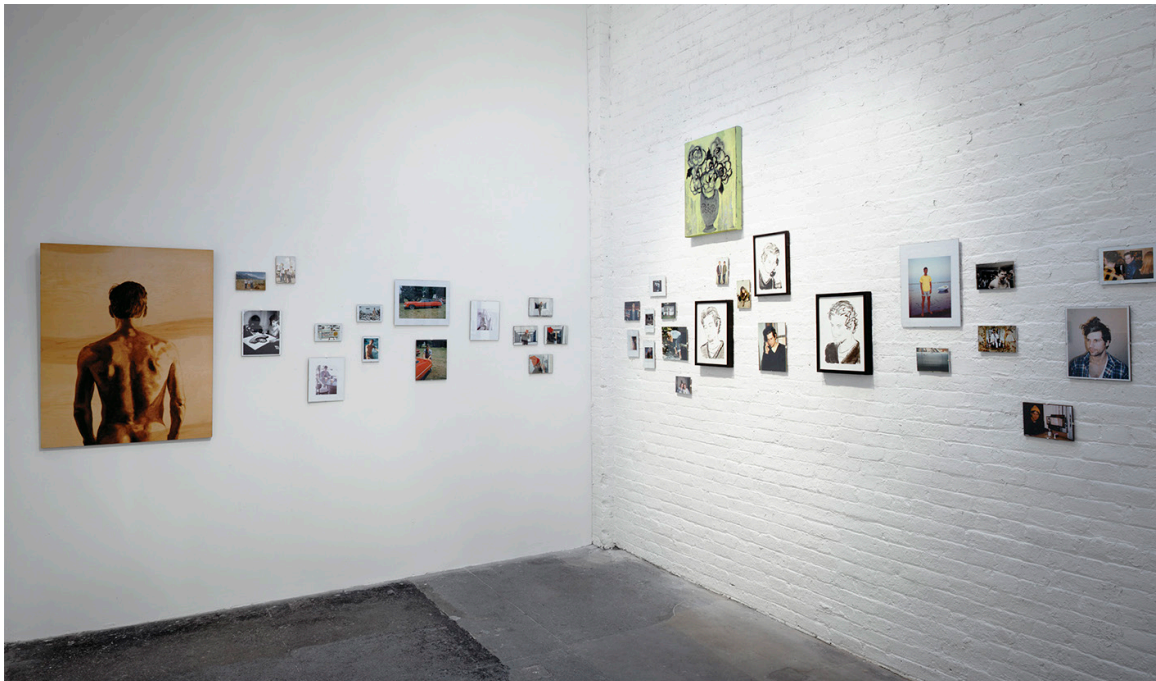
"Art at the End of the 20th Century: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art," National Gallery, Alexandros Soutzos Museum, Athens; traveled to Museu d'Art Contemporani, Barcelona; Kunstmuseum Bonn
"Innovation: American Art of Today from the Misumi Art Collection," Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, Chiba, Japan
"The Changing Image," Claudia Gian Ferrari Arte Contemporanea, Milan
"Vehicle," Paolo Baldacci Gallery, New York

1997

"Landscape: The Pastoral to the Urban," Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
"Project Painting," Basilico Fine Arts, New York
"Technological Drift," Lawing Gallery, Houston
"American Art 1975–1995 from the Whitney Museum: Multiple Identity," Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin
"Heart, Mind, Body, Soul: American Art in the 1990s, selections from the Permanent Collection," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

1998

"Painting Now and Forever: Part I," Matthew Marks Gallery and Pat Hearn Gallery, New York
"Sea Change," Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY
"C," Elizabeth Cherry Contemporary Art, Tucson, AZ



Portraits of Peter Cain, and works inspired by him, made by Jack Pierson, Nan Goldin, Tabboo!, Billy Sullivan, and others in a memorial display accompanying the exhibition "Peter Cain: New Paintings and Drawings" at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 1997. Below, from left: *Glendale Boulevard*, 1996 [p. 149]. *Mobil*, 1996 [p. 149]. *Sean Number One*, 1996 [p. 115]. *Untitled Number Three*, 1996 [p. 139]. *Sean Number Two*, 1996 [p. 121]



2001

“Camera Works: The Photographic Impulse in Modern Art,” Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York
“Surrounding Interiors: Views Inside the Car,” Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, FL; traveled to
Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College, MA; Frederick R. Weisman Art
Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
“A Work in Progress: Selections from the New Museum Collection,” New Museum, New York
“Tenth Anniversary Exhibition: 100 Drawings and Photographs,” Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

2002

“Drawings: Alan Saret and Peter Cain,” Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

2003

“Pop Thru Out,” Arario Gallery, Cheonan, Korea
PKM Gallery, Seoul
“We Love Painting: Contemporary American Art from the Misumi Collection,” Museum of
Contemporary Art, Tokyo
“My people were fair and had cum in their hair (but now they’re content to spray stars from your
boughs),” Team Gallery, New York
“Auto-nom: das Automobil in der zeitgenossischen Kunst,” NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft,
Düsseldorf
“GameOver,” Grimm/Rosenfeld, Munich

2004

“About Painting,” Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga
Springs, NY

2005

“Drive: Automobili nell’arte contemporanea,” Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Bologna
“Contemporary American Art from the Misumi Collection,” Tottori Prefectural Museum, Tottori,
Japan

2006

“Twice Drawn, Part 2,” The Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College,
Saratoga Springs, NY
“Pop Art 1960s > 2000s: From Lichtenstein, Warhol to the Current Generation,” Seiji Togo
Memorial Sompō Japan Museum of Art, Sompō, Japan

2009

“Wall Rockets: Contemporary Artists and Ed Ruscha,” FLAG Art Foundation, New York;
traveled to Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo

2010

“Pastorale,” 80WSE, New York

2011

“Legacy: The Emily Fisher Landau Collection,” Whitney Museum of Art, New York; traveled to
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL; San Jose Museum of Art, CA; and Grand
Rapids Art Museum, MI

2013

“NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star,” New Museum, New York
“Speak, Memory,” Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, New York
“Ambach & Rice Presents: 40 Years at the Daniel Weinberg Gallery,” Daniel Weinberg Gallery,
Los Angeles

2014

“A Drawing Show,” Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

2015

“Peter Cain, Robert Gober, Gary Hume, Tony Smith, Anne Truitt,” Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

2016

“Pavlova’s Dawg and Other Works by Gallery Artists,” Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles

I HOPE YOUR
NOT POSPONING
BECAUSE OF
FEAR

I Hope Your Not Posponing Because of Fear, 1996
Ink on paper
16 x 12 inches; 41 x 31 cm
Found on the wall of the artist's studio after his death

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Cheim, John, Diego Cortez, Carmen Gimenez, and Klaus Kertess. *Drawing the Line Against AIDS* (New York: Rizzoli)

Philbin, Ann, Ingrid Schaffner, Charles Simic, Mary Ann Caws, and Elizabeth Finch. *The Return of the Cadavre Exquis* (New York: The Drawing Center)

Sussman, Elisabeth, Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, and Lisa Phillips. *1993 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art)

1994

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1995

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Sobel, Dean. *25 Americans: Painting in the 90s* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum)

1996

Iannacci, Anthony. *The Changing Image* (Milan: Claudia Gian Ferrari Arte Contemporanea)
Innovation: American Art of Today from the Misumi Art Collection (Chiba, Japan: Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art)

1997

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Ross, David, and Ida Gianelli. *American Art 1975–1995 from the Whitney Museum: Multiple Identity* (Milan: Charta)

Schaffner, Ingrid. *Project Painting* (New York: Basilico Fine Arts)

1998

Kertess, Klaus. *Sea Change* (Southampton, NY: Parrish Art Museum)

2000

Anderson, Maxwell, et al. *2000 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art)

2001

Fox, Judith Hoos, et al. *Inside Cars* (New York: 2wice Arts Foundation)

2002

Nickas, Bob, and Carroll Dunham. *Peter Cain: More Courage and Less Oil* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery)

2003

Barthes, Roland, Ulrich Lehmann, and Werner Lippert. *Auto-nom: Das Automobil in der zeitgenössischen Kunst* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz)

Hiromoto, Nobuyuki, and Junichi Shioda. *We Love Painting: Contemporary American Art from Misumi Collection* (Tokyo: Museum of Contemporary Art)

MacAdam, Barbara. *Pop Thru Out* (Cheonan, Korea: Arario Gallery)

2005

Contemporary Voice: Contemporary American Art from Misumi Collection (Tottori, Japan: Tottori Prefectural Museum)

MORE
COURAGE
AND
LESS
Oil

More Courage and Less Oil, 1996

Ink on paper

20 x 16 inches; 51 x 41 cm

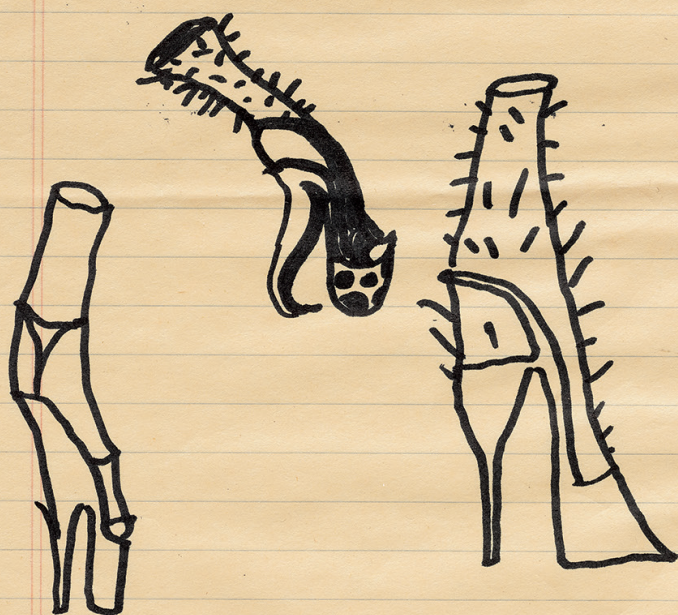
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- 2010
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- 2011
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- 2013
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- Dunham, Carroll. "Head over Wheels." *Artforum*, April, pp. 19–20
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EXPLORE THE LIMITS OF
FAILURE.



PAINTINGS
CAPATOL 'P'

Explore the Limits of Failure. / Paintings Capatol "P", 1996
Ink on paper
11 x 8½ inches; 28 x 22 cm
Found on the wall of the artist's studio after his death

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1998

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2002

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2013

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2016

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“The Last of Cain” © Richard Meyer
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Page 1
Peter Cain in his 1973 Cadillac Coupe, Saint Augustine, Florida, 1993

Page 4
Study for Miata #8, 1989
Collage
11 x 13 inches; 28 x 33 cm

Page 164
Peter Cain in a Mazda Miata, 1993

